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To the Authorities of Post-Primary Schools

M4/95.

RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION

1. *Introduction*

The Minister for Education has decided to proceed with arrangements for the introduction into schools of Relationships and Sexuality Education. This will be developed in accordance with the recommendations of the Report of the Expert Advisory Group on Relationships and Sexuality Education, taking account of the response of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. The Department of Education will continue to consult with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the Partners in Education in this regard.

2. *Relationships and Sexuality Education*

- 2.1 Relationships and Sexuality Education is a lifelong process of acquiring knowledge and understanding and of developing attitudes, beliefs and values about sexual identity, relationships and intimacy. In the school setting it is an integral part of general educational provision, which seeks to promote the overall development of the person and which includes the integration of sexuality into personal understanding, growth and development.

Through Relationships and Sexuality Education, formal opportunities are provided for young people to acquire knowledge and understanding of human sexuality, through processes which will enable them to form values and establish behaviours within a moral and spiritual framework.

3 *Rationale for inclusion of Relationships and Sexuality Education in the Curriculum*

- 3.1 Education aims to contribute towards the development of all aspects of the individual. It is in this context that Social, Personal and Health Education, encompassing Relationships and Sexuality Education, is being included as part of the curriculum of Primary and Post-Primary schools.
- 3.2 There is broad agreement in Irish society on the need for Relationships and Sexuality Education in the formal education system. Support for a positive educational programme on human sexuality within the context of faith and morality has been articulated by church bodies. Educational groups, including the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, teacher unions and national parent representative bodies, have publicly stated the need for such a formal programme in schools, from primary through second level. Aspects of contemporary life also point to the need for a soundly-based Relationships and Sexuality Education programme.
- 3.3 In order to begin the implementation phase, the Report of the Expert Advisory Group on Relationships and Sexuality Education is being circulated to all schools and to other interested bodies with this circular.

4 *Consultation with the NCCA*

- 4.1 The Report of the Expert Advisory Group was sent to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Following consideration of the NCCA response, the Council has now been asked to develop draft curriculum guidelines, teaching/learning strategies and assessment/evaluation procedures.

5 *Implementation*

- 5.1 It is necessary now to begin a *process* which will ensure that all children and young people in schools at primary and post-primary levels may have access to Social, Personal and Health Education appropriate to their levels of development and needs. Relationships and Sexuality Education will be an integral part of Social, Personal and Health Education which will be addressed in a developmental way from primary through post-primary school.

5.2 *Development of School Policy*

Schools are requested to begin the process of developing their policies at this time so that they may start to include Relationships and Sexuality Education and wider aspects of Social, Personal and Health Education in their curricula in the school year 1995/96 (reference is made to Chapter 3 of the attached Report which includes a suggested approach to and a format for developing a school policy).

It is emphasised that what is involved is a *process of development* which should commence now and which will result in good quality programmes being delivered in schools in accordance with the wishes of parents, the ethos of individual schools and related to the needs of children and young people.

Delivery of Programmes

While it is recommended that Relationships and Sexuality Education be developed in the context of Social, Personal and Health Education, priority should be given by schools in the immediate term to the development and implementation of a Relationships and Sexuality Education policy and programme.

At primary level, Relationships and Sexuality Education will have particular relevance across a number of curricular areas. Therefore, it is important that specific timetabling be arranged from within existing curricular provision for a co-ordinated programme of Social, Personal and Health Education, which would include Relationships and Sexuality Education.

At post-primary level, the Department of Education will accept, for the purposes of a teacher's timetabled class-contact hours, hours spent teaching Social Personal and Health Education in any school where Relationships and Sexuality Education is included as a distinct element of that subject.

The optimum delivery at both levels would be by way of a timetabled core, where appropriate, with cross-curricular links and whole-school support, within the framework of resources available to schools.

Support by the Department of Education

It is recognised that many schools, at primary and post-primary levels, are already making good provision for Relationships and Sexuality Education and, indeed, for the wider aspects of Social, Personal and Health Education. It is essential that the entire process of development should benefit from this experience. Equally it is recognised that many schools and their teachers and parents feel the need for guidance and support in developing their policies and programmes. The role of the Department will be one of providing leadership, support and guidance by outlining the overall direction of Relationships and Sexuality Education and by facilitating and supporting the involvement of the Partners in planning for implementation. In particular:

- An Implementation Group, representative of the Department, the NCCA and the Partners in Education, will be set up to identify the necessary supports for school policy development and implementation.

The Department of Education, in consultation with the Department of Health and other agencies, will identify all initiatives relating to health education currently underway in primary and post-primary schools with a view to further development and dissemination of good practice.

- Consultation and planning for these initiatives will commence immediately. It is also envisaged that there will be an ongoing need for in-career development and training related to organisational matters and programme delivery over the next few years.

6. *Rights of Parents*

- 6.1 In deciding to include a Relationships and Sexuality Education programme as part of Social, Personal and Health Education in school curricula, the right and duty of parents to provide for the religious, moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children is acknowledged. While the home is the natural environment in which Relationships and Sexuality Education takes place, most parents look to schools for support in fulfilling their obligations to their children in this area of development. Consequently, the school is seen as playing a supportive and complementary role to the home in this task. It is envisaged that this will be achieved by involving parents, with management and teachers, and, where appropriate, with pupils, in a collaborative exercise towards school policy development. This policy will make provision for the rights of parents who hold conscientious or moral objections to the inclusion of such programmes on the curriculum and will state how the school intends to address these situations.

7. *Role of the Partners in Education*

- 7.1 The success of policy and programme development and implementation in this area will depend on a collaborative approach between the partners: the Department of Education, school management authorities, teachers, parents and, where appropriate, pupils.
- 7.2 As stated earlier, the role of the Department is one of providing leadership, support and guidance by outlining the overall direction of Relationships and Sexuality Education and by facilitating and supporting the involvement of the Partners in planning for implementation.
- 7.3 The management authorities of individual schools have the responsibility for developing policy in collaboration with parents, staff and, where appropriate, pupils. Management and their staffs have the responsibility for the direct delivery of education including Relationships and Sexuality Education. It is recognised that this education will be determined and delivered in accordance with the ethos and core values of the individual school.
- 7.4 The role of parents will be developed and supported through involvement, with management and teachers, and, where appropriate, pupils, in a collaborative exercise towards policy development.

8. *Conclusion*

- 8.1 It is necessary to begin the process of developing programmes in schools without undue delay. The Minister wishes that all of the Partners should be involved in this process which is of fundamental educational importance. She looks forward to the co-operation of school authorities, of teachers and of parents in this important task of ensuring that all children and young people will have access to good-quality programmes in Relationships and Sexuality Education, within the overall context of Social, Personal and Health Education.

Don Thornhill,
Secretary

January, 1995