



Circular 0027/2008

TO THE PRINCIPALS AND BOARDS OF MANAGEMENT IN POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this Circular is to remind schools of their obligations to
- (a) develop a school policy in regard to Relationships and Sexuality Education and
 - (b) to implement a programme in this area as an element of Social Personal and Health Education at junior cycle, and as an RSE programme in senior cycle.

Circulars M4/95, M20/96, M22/00 and M11/03 refer. These circulars required schools to begin a process of developing Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) policies and programmes, and to implement them for all students from First Year to Sixth Year. RSE is an integral element of the Social Personal and Health Education Programme for all students at junior cycle. A Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum is currently being developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

- 1.2 Schools have an obligation to teach Senior Cycle RSE even in the absence of a time-tabled SPHE class. An interim curriculum for Junior and Senior Cycle RSE was produced in 1996. Teaching resources for Junior and Senior Cycle RSE were developed in 1998 and 1999. These resources are available to download at www.sphe.ie and set out comprehensive lesson plans and suggested activities to support the implementation of the programme.
- 1.3 It is the responsibility of the Board of Management of the school to ensure that an RSE programme is made available to all students. Under Section 9 of the Education Act 1998, schools are required to promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and promote health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school. Regard must also be had to Section 30(e) under which a child may not be required to attend instruction in any subject which is contrary to the conscience of the parent of the student, or in the case of a student who has reached 18, the student.

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.

2.2 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.

2.3 Aspects of contemporary life point to the need for a soundly based Relationships and Sexuality Education programme. There is broad agreement in Irish society on the need for Relationships and Sexuality Education in the formal education system.

3 Development and implementation of an RSE Policy

3.1 Schools are required to have a policy for RSE and are advised to contextualise their RSE policy in the overall subject plan for SPHE.

3.2 The effectiveness of an RSE programme is dependent upon a collaborative process of policy development involving teachers, parents/guardians, members of Boards of Management and students.

3.3 The RSE policy should reflect the core values and ethos of the school as outlined in the school's mission statement.

3.4 Spiritual, moral and ethical issues may arise when teaching RSE. The school's RSE policy should guide teachers in the treatment of such issues, in accordance with the ethos of the school.

4 Delivery of an RSE Programme

4.1 Schools are required to teach all aspects of the RSE programme, including family planning, sexually transmitted infections and sexual orientation. Elements of the programme cannot be omitted on the grounds of school ethos; however all aspects of the programme can and should be taught within the ethos and value system of the school as expressed in the RSE policy.

4.2 While the RSE Interim Curriculum Guidelines and Resource Materials give guidance regarding the stage at which elements of the programme should be taught, schools can decide to teach topics at an earlier or a later stage, depending on the needs of the students.

4.3 Given the sensitivity of some aspects of RSE, schools are advised to avail of the RSE and SPHE training offered through the SPHE Support Service. (www.sphe.ie, Marino Institute of Education, Griffith Ave, Dublin 9, phone 01-8057718, fax 01-8535113, email sphe@mie.ie)

5. Evaluation of RSE

The evaluation report '*RSE in the Context of SPHE*' was published in March 2007 by the Department and the Crisis Pregnancy Agency, and has been distributed to schools. A copy is also on the Department's website at www.education.ie (see publications). The report shows

- Widespread support for both the broad principles and the content of the programme from teachers, parents and health professionals
- Strong levels of interest and support from parents and students as to the importance of Relationships and Sexuality Education in schools
- Increasing levels of implementation vis-à-vis earlier studies, with 76% of schools showing high or moderate levels of implementation, and with 90% of schools teaching RSE at some level.

- 84.4% of schools had appointed an SPHE co-ordinator
- Positive feedback from teachers as to the usefulness of the in-service training they received.

Within school, the report shows that school ethos, whole school approaches to social education and pastoral care, the commitment of the principal, having an RSE policy, an SPHE co-ordinator and team approaches to social and personal education are all factors which influence the effectiveness of RSE in schools.

While overall implementation levels are improving, the report shows that non implementation increases in the senior classes, particularly in single sex boys' schools. Where schools are implementing RSE, there is evidence in the report that the content may be being implemented selectively. In particular, students have reported that they consider the topics of contraception, safe sex, condom use and sexual orientation are not adequately covered.

6 Support by the Department of Education and Science

- 6.1 An RSE policy template is available on the Department of Education and Science website (www.education.gov.ie)
- 6.2 All the documents referred to in this circular are available with the policy template on the Department of Education and Science website.
- 6.3 The SPHE Support Service supports schools with RSE teacher training, policy development and programme planning. (www.sphe.ie)
- 6.4 A DVD covering the issues of relationships, contraception, sexually transmitted infections and sexual orientation is currently being developed as a collaborative exercise between the Department, the Health Services Executive and the Crisis Pregnancy Agency. It is hoped that this will be available in mid 2008. The DVD will provide a valuable resource for teachers and schools and should assist in ensuring consistency of treatment of these issues in the curriculum. Schools are hereby reminded of their obligations to provide for
- the development of an RSE policy in collaboration with teachers, school management and parents,
 - the implementation of an RSE programme at all levels of post primary schooling, as an integral component of SPHE at junior cycle, and as a programme in senior cycle
 - the use of resources and materials in accordance with the school's RSE policy and programme.

Where schools have not already done so, they should begin this process with a view to full compliance as early as possible from 2008/9. This circular outlines the supports, training and resources which are available to assist schools in this task.

Please bring this circular to the attention of teachers and members of the school board of management. This circular may also be accessed at www.education.ie under Education Personnel/Circulars

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