**11 June 2021**

XXX National School

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**Petition - Opposition to Flourish RSE Programme**

Dear Board of Management of XXX National School,

We are writing to you to draw your attention to the recent publication of the Flourish Programme. This is the new Catholic-ethos Relationships and Sexuality Programme proposed by the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association and created by the Council for Catechetics of the Irish Bishops’ Conference.

As parents of primary-aged schoolchildren we do not feel that the Flourish programme is fit for purpose when teaching RSE to children. It is discriminatory to LGBTQ+ children and families and it does not reflect the Constitutional position on marriage. What is taught to all children in Ireland, particularly with regard to sexual education, should be fact-based: everything that the children hear should be free from the influence of a religious ethos. During Leader’s Questions on 29 April 2021, Roisin Shortall asked: *“Do we really want LGBTQ+ children in schools, who may be struggling with their sexual orientation, to be taught that their relationships are in any way less worthy, meaningful, loving, or deserving of respect than their heterosexual peers? Because that is the influence of this program”*. She continued: *“Sex education needs to be fact-based, and facts do not have an ethos.”* As parents we agree with her analysis of the discrimination and harm to children that the Flourish programme would cause.

This programme is designed to intertwine God and the beliefs of the Catholic Church into every aspect of relationships and sexuality education, which goes against international best practice (Pound et al, 2017; Haberland and Rogow, 2015) and represents a retrograde step. We need to build an open society that accepts all beliefs, sexualities and genders, not one that would seek to impose a hierarchy of family types or sexualities.

The conflating of a religious programme with relationships and sexuality education will inevitably result in confusion for children as they grow and mature into adults. God and/or Jesus is mentioned in every single aspect of Flourish – this is not a thorough and scientifically accurate programme as recommended by research. Instead, it is a programme that is designed to further the teachings of the Catholic Church. It also fails to align the teaching of RSE in primary and secondary schools. This approach goes against the recommendation that RSE be taught in a spiral manner from primary through to secondary school with greater depth given to similar topics as students grow and mature. Flourish will result in an inconsistency between the religious approach taken to RSE in the around 90% of primary schools under Catholic management and the non-religious approach taken by secondary schools.

The teaching of RSE in our schools has been a contentious issue for years and has led to a confusion and a reluctance on the part of teachers to address some of the more controversial aspects of sex and sexuality (Keating et al 2018; NCCA 2019). In a modern world where genders range from male and female to transgender and intersex, where responsible sex is more than abstinence until after marriage, where relationships are homosexual and heterosexual, we need to be openly addressing these topics with our children and not brushing them further under the carpet and perpetuating the stigma that has caused so much pain and heartache in the past.

The creation of RSE programmes has been the subject of much research in recent years (see Keating et al, 2018; Nolan and Smyth, 2020) and this research supports the introduction of a comprehensive programme with an emphasis on human rights and gender equality. Such a programme embraces the issues that are of most interest and concern to our young people, is scientifically based; is not heteronormative, and does not see marriage as the answer to all sex-related questions. It is also a programme that gives our young people a sense of bodily autonomy and self-esteem when it comes to sex and sexuality.

If Flourish is rolled out in XXX NS, parents will be forced to choose between the religious indoctrination of their children and denying them access to RSE. This would represent a complete failure in the part of the State, which is required to ensure *“that the children receive a certain minimum education, moral, intellectual and social”* (Article 42.3.2). We do not want XXX NS to fail our children. The Irish Bishops’ Conference has clearly indicated that the Flourish programme is not mandatory.

As parents of children in XXX NS, we firmly reject the Flourish Programme and respectfully request that the Board of Management resolves NOT to use this programme.

We request a response to this letter and look forward to your assurance that you will support our requests detailed above. We look forward to hearing from you.

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