

Education Unions, Children's Rights Groups and LGBTQIA+ Organisations call on Education Minister to Reinstate Trans Guidance

Today a group of youth organisations, LGBTQIA+ charities and education unions representing thousands of teaching and non-teaching staff across Northern Ireland have condemned the Education Minister's removal of guidance for supporting trans youth in education, urging him to reinstate the guidance in a joint statement co-ordinated by The Rainbow Project.

Alexa Moore, Policy Campaigns and Communications Manager at The Rainbow Project, said, "All of our young people are entitled to and should enjoy the best possible education that we can offer them – including LGBT pupils. The Minister's removal of this guidance at the very start of the school term hasn't been good for pupils, for teachers, or for parents. We urge him to reinstate the guidance and meaningfully engage with the young people affected by his decisions."

The joint statement references the Department's own research published in 2017 after it emerged this morning that the Department has removed the publication from its website. The report showed that, at the time, around two thirds of LGBT pupils did not feel safe and supported in school, and that trans pupils faced key issues addressed in the guidance including access to toilets, flexible uniform policies, and appropriate use of name and pronouns.

Susan Neill, vice-chair of NIC-ICTU's Education Group, which "represents thousands of dedicated education workers from teachers to support staff," expressed that they are "gravely concerned that this important guidance has been withdrawn and would ask that the Minister immediately publish the legal basis for the withdrawal."

Susan added, "Given the legal uncertainty as to how the Supreme Court judgement applies to Northern Ireland's devolved institutions, we believe that this is at best a premature move on the part of a Minister who would be better to focus on delivering educational outcomes for every child in every school across Northern Ireland. We are also concerned about the absence of discussion or consultation with stakeholders, and we urge the NI Assembly Education Committee to seek the legal basis for the Minister's decision, and to seek the restoration of the guidance to the EA website."

The detailed guidance, which placed no legal obligations on schools, explored issues including appropriate use of name and pronouns, access to facilities, and safeguarding considerations in depth. It has been replaced by a page long 'Policy Statement' which outlines the Department's legal position but provides little advice to teachers for supporting young people.

Cohen Taylor, Chairperson of the NI Youth Forum has said, "In its most recent report, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child made it clear that our government must act to protect LGBTQIA+ young people. The NI Youth Forum is committed to securing a Bill of Rights that guarantees safety, equality and dignity for every young person, including LGBTQIA+ youth."

Restoring the existing guidance on supporting transgender and gender diverse young people is a necessary step towards that goal.”

ENDS

Notes to Editor:

- The previous EA guidance was first published in 2019 following a codesign process involving directly affected groups, school staff and head teachers, led by the Education Authority.
- Earlier this week a spokesperson for the Northern Ireland Teaching Council said the withdrawal of the guidance will ["create confusion and leave schools without the necessary framework to support these pupils effectively"](#).
- The statement, the full text of which is below, has been supported by: The Rainbow Project; GMB; Children's Law Centre; Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO); NUS-UI; National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT); Here NI; NASUWT; Cara-Friend; Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA); Youth Action; Prospect; Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI); Unison; Ulster Teachers' Union (UTU).

We the undersigned LGBTQIA+, human rights organisations and education unions are disappointed and concerned by the Education Minister's decision to remove guidance which provided information to schools in relation to supporting transgender and gender diverse pupils.

Transgender young people in school are entitled to compassion, acceptance and support. The removal of guidance for supporting these young people, with no replacement guidance, is a step back for those young people struggling in school, as well as their parents and teachers seeking to support them.

The previous guidance from the Education Authority was non-statutory and non-binding, meaning schools already had scope to support pupils in a manner that suited the individual school. It is vital that schools are an inclusive, welcoming and empowering space for all pupils. This decision, taken without any meaningful consultation with the children and young people it will impact upon, is contrary to that goal.

The Department's own 2017 research identified that appropriate access to toilets, changing facilities, and flexibility with uniform policies were key issues trans young people faced, and the key issues that caused over half of LGBT pupils to not feel supported in schools.

The Minister has clearly misunderstood that to consider children's best interests is to consider the best interests of each individual child, including children and young people who are developing their own understanding of their identity. We are in no doubt that his decision will have direct consequences for pupils. It will affect their ability to fully participate in school life,

to thrive in their educational environment, and will have knock-on impacts on other services including CAMHS.

The Minister has a responsibility to prioritise the education and wellbeing of all pupils over stoking political culture wars. We call on him to reinstate this guidance and to meaningfully engage with the young people, parents and school staff this directly affects.