



Monday 14th October 2024

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I hope this letter finds you well and your son/daughter is navigating their way towards the end of the first term at Our Lady's. You may have been aware of some misinformation in the media circles around SPHE/RSE in second level schools. The Department of Education have moved to clarify for schools exactly the position in relation to this element of the curriculum. Please see the following information at the end of this letter.

1. SPHE update information issued by DES October 2024
2. Information for Parents – NCCA (also available on NCCA website)

At Our Lady's measures have been in place to ensure all Teachers are trained and competent to deliver SPHE/RSE in the context of the Department of Education curriculum at Senior and Junior level and our values as a CEIST school.

As always you are free to contact the school should you require any further information or clarification around this or any other issue.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Fogarty

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Principal

Martina Butler

Martina Butler

Deputy Principal



SPHE Information Update

Junior Cycle SPHE specification

- The new Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum specification was introduced in September 2023 for all first years. The aim of the course is to build students' self-awareness and positive self-worth; to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will support them to lead fulfilling and healthy lives; empower them to create, nurture and maintain respectful and loving relationships with self and others; and enhance their capacity to contribute positively to society.
- The Junior Cycle SPHE specification consists of four strands: Understanding Myself and Others; Making Healthy Choices; Relationship and Sexuality; and Emotional Wellbeing. You can view it [here](#).
- Teaching and learning with the new curriculum is designed to be appropriate for the age and stage of development of students, whether in first year, second year or third year. This is based on research and the extensive public consultation led by the NCCA in 2022. The report of the consultation is [here](#).
- The final specification is informed by this consultation. It is supported by teacher professional learning seminars designed and provided by Oide, the professional support service for teachers.
- Learning outcomes over the three years of Junior Cycle range from communicating in a respectful and effective manner, to appreciating the importance of setting healthy boundaries, considering the impact of stress and techniques to manage day to day stresses, and learning outcomes dealing with alcohol, smoking and other addictive substances.
- Sensitive topics such as the influence of pornography are also addressed. Any suggestion that teachers would be expected to teach or introduce explicit content or topics is false. The curriculum categorically does not expose children to graphic or explicit content or normalise the use of pornography. On the contrary, key messages would be that pornography is not a good place to go to learn about sex, that it can be disturbing and even damaging for young people, and that it is incompatible with values of human dignity, respect and gender equality.
- The curriculum specification is published [here](#) where parents and other interested parties can view the full specification including aim, rationale and learning outcomes for themselves.
- It should also be noted that, in accordance with Section 30 of the Education Act, 1998, parents have a right to have their children opt out of classes which are contrary to the conscience of the parent if they so wish.



- The NCCA has published an information note for parents on its website which can be accessed [here](#)
- Oide, the professional teacher support service, has designed a two-day webinar to introduce teachers to the specification, and this has been provided to more than 1,000 teachers to date.
- In direct response to teachers' request for support for classroom teaching of SPHE, the NCCA created three online toolkits – one for primary, one for junior cycle and one for senior cycle teachers. All three are available on www.curriculumonline.ie. These resources are carefully selected for Irish classrooms and mapped out according to the age and stage of learners. Teachers are advised to judge the relevance and appropriateness of each resource in the context of their students' unique needs, stage of development and school context. Some of the resources are listed as background reading for teachers and others are listed as for use in the classroom.

Graduate Diploma in Social, Personal and Health Education and Relationships and Sexuality Education

- It is understood that a video has been circulating suggesting that teachers will be expected to introduce certain explicit and inappropriate topics and materials in the classroom. The Department of Education and DCU have confirmed this is categorically not the case.
- The Graduate Diploma in SPHE/RSE is provided by Dublin City University (DCU) Institute of Education. The DCU programme was developed following a tendering process and is fully academically accredited through DCU's quality assurance processes for any new programme. DCU has extensive experience and expertise in the field of teacher education, including, specifically, personnel with significant research experience in SPHE/RSE.
- Teachers participating in the DCU programme will be involved in critical exploration of resources and content related to SPHE, including examples used internationally as well as material accessed by children and young adults directly. As such, the material studied and viewed by teachers on the course is provided to them as adults and it is clearly understood that no inappropriate graphic or explicit material should ever be used in a classroom setting.
- This programme is the first of its kind in Ireland and offers post-primary teachers the opportunity to upskill in this very important subject area, something that has been called for by teacher representative groups. This is particularly important given the recently updated Junior and Senior Cycle SPHE specifications, schools having until September 2027 to introduce the latter for students entering fifth year.



- The teaching of SPHE/RSE is a complex endeavour given the breadth and perceived sensitivities of the topics addressed. The programme developed by DCU offers the integrity of an evidence-based approach, grounded in models of good practice, delivered by a core team of highly qualified teacher educators with leadership and expertise in SPHE/RSE pedagogy, nationally and internationally recognised researchers and experienced blended learning designs.
- It provides a pathway for progression for Post Primary teachers interested in developing their skills in teaching SPHE/RSE and, in so doing, builds capacity and leadership within the teaching profession in relation to teaching in this important area.
- Participants on the DCU programme are enabled to acquire, develop and advance their competencies in the areas of knowledge, personal development and skills that will enable them to teach SPHE/RSE confidently and competently to Senior Cycle level.
- The programme purposely incorporates three areas of professional learning, namely: personal development, skills and knowledge. Alongside the development of specialist subject knowledge, a focus on teachers' own personal development and on the development of a skills-set needed for the SPHE/RSE classroom are key components of this programme.
- The teaching, learning and assessment methodologies employed seek to facilitate teachers' critical interrogation of their knowledge and understanding of the policies, theoretical foundations and curricula salient to SPHE/RSE and of innovative, collaborative pedagogies and creative ways of working with young people. Participants are supported to critically engage with the complexities of the subject area through in-class discussions and debates.

Senior Cycle SPHE specification

- The Minister has approved an updated SPHE curriculum for Senior Cycle. The specification is designed as a mandatory component to support 60 hours of teaching and learning over two years, reflecting the importance of SPHE for young people at this stage in their post-primary education.
- Schools have until September 2027 to introduce the specification for students entering fifth year, with the exception of students following the Leaving Certificate Applied (see below). This provides continuity with the Junior Cycle SPHE specification for the first post-Transition Year cohort of students to have completed the Junior Cycle specification.
- The timeline will be subject to the necessary preparatory work in relation to provision of teacher education and resources, as well as consideration of other practical issues including timetabling.



- The new specification will replace Social Education modules I and II of the Leaving Certificate Applied. It is planned that this change will apply for all LCA students entering 5th year in 2025.
- The aim of the new Senior Cycle SPHE specification is to empower students to:
Be healthy, resilient, confident, responsible and empathetic young adults;
Nurture respectful, loving and caring relationships; and
Prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.
- As with the Junior Cycle SPHE specification, an extensive consultation took place in 2023, led by the NCCA, as part of the development of the specification. The report of this consultation can be found [here](#).
- An information note for parents can be found [here](#).
- The curriculum specification itself can be viewed [here](#).

Other Supports for Teachers

Separate to DCU Postgraduate Programme, professional learning on both the Junior and Senior Cycle specifications will be provided by Oide, the teacher professional development service for all schools. Oide plans the following supports in the current school year:

Title of Professional Learning Experience (PLE)		Focus of PLE	Delivery of PLE
An Introduction to the Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Specification (2023) Two Day Professional Learning Experience	JC SPHE	The focus of this two-day professional learning experience will be the implementation of the JC SPHE Specification (2023).	Rollout begins October 1st 2024
An Introduction to the Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education	SC SPHE	The focus of this two-day professional learning experience will be the implementation of the SC SPHE Specification (2024).	Rollout is currently scheduled to begin



<p>(SPHE) Specification (2024) Two Day Professional Learning Experience</p>			<p>November 25th 2024 (At design stage currently).</p>
<p>Teaching Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) across the Strands of the JC SPHE Specification Two Day Professional Learning Experience</p>	<p>JC SPHE</p>	<p>This two-day professional learning experience will explore different teaching and learning pedagogical approaches relevant to facilitating Junior Cycle RSE and explore a range of resources available to support teaching and learning in Junior Cycle RSE.</p>	<p>Rollout will begin October 15th 2024</p>
<p>Senior Cycle Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Two Day Professional Learning Experience</p>	<p>SC SPHE</p>	<p>This two-day professional learning experience will explore pedagogical approaches for facilitating Senior Cycle RSE. It will also introduce participants to a range of resources to support planning for teaching and learning in Senior Cycle RSE.</p>	<p>Rollout will begin in January 2025</p>
<p>SPHE In-School Support</p>	<p>SPHE</p>	<p>School leaders may apply for SPHE school support using Oide's online application system. Once the application is received, one of our SPHE professional learning leaders will contact the school leader to arrange a school support visit tailored to the unique needs and context of their school.</p>	

Information for parents

Junior Cycle SPHE

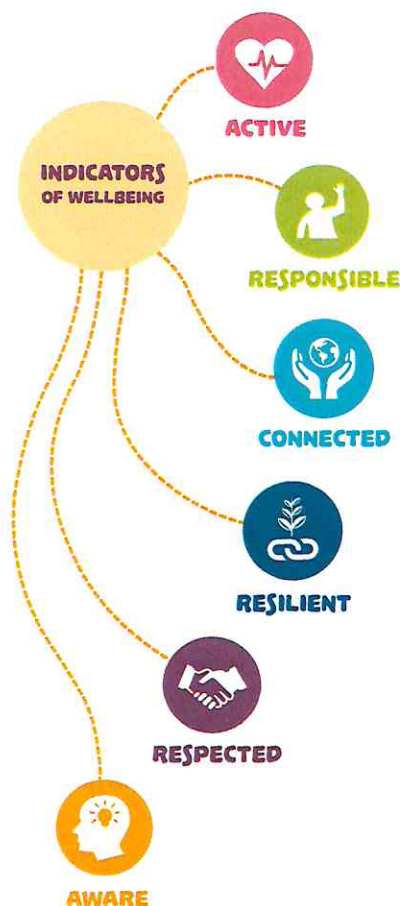
The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is currently working on updating the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum from primary through to senior cycle education. The new Junior Cycle SPHE course will be introduced in schools in September 2023.

Why SPHE matters

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) provides a safe classroom setting where students can discuss and learn about important aspects of their lives. Within this space, students can grow in awareness, and develop the understanding and skills they need to maintain healthy lives, make healthy choices and build caring and respectful relationships.

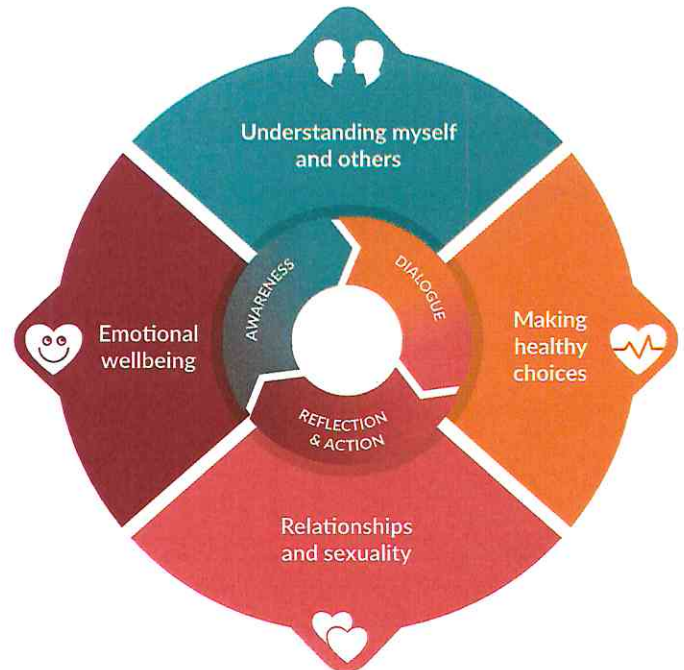
SPHE places a strong focus on developing the important life skills that young people need growing up in a fast changing and complex world. Specifically, it focuses on developing the social and emotional skills of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness and relationship skills.

SPHE is a key pillar of the junior cycle Wellbeing programme in all schools as it helps students identify actions they can take to protect and promote their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. SPHE fosters all 6 indicators of Wellbeing.



Source: [Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines](#)

What will students be learning in SPHE?



Learning in the course is divided into four strands with each setting out important learning for students. These strands are:

- Understanding myself and others
- Making healthy choices
- Relationships and sexuality
- Emotional wellbeing

Teaching and learning in SPHE focuses on

- **awareness-building** so that students understand their own thoughts, emotions, values and behaviour and how different factors influence these
- **respectful dialogue** which gives students opportunities to hear and to discuss a diversity of viewpoints and enlarge their understanding on topics of relevance to their lives.
- **students reflecting** on what they have learned and coming to informed thoughtful decisions about how the learning can help them in their lives now or in the future.

Information for parents

The four stands of Junior Cycle SPHE

Understanding myself and others

This is a foundational strand as it focuses on developing self-awareness and self-esteem and building some of the social and emotional skills needed for healthy relationships. This strand helps students to identify their personal strengths and values. It explores the range of influences that impact on self-esteem and self-image and self-identity.

Making healthy choices

This strand is about helping students to consider how they can make healthy choices and the influences at play. They will discuss a range of aspects – food, sleep, alcohol and other addictive substances and behaviours, and of course their online world.

Relationships and sexuality

Here the key focus is on creating and maintaining healthy and respectful relationships. So students will discuss the signs of healthy, unhealthy and abusive relationships, how to set boundaries in relationships and show respect for the boundaries of others. They will learn about the importance of consent as an aspect of all healthy relationships and how to take care of their reproductive health. There is also a focus on responsible decision making and examining some of the pressures on young people to become sexually active.

Emotional wellbeing

The focus in this strand is on developing young people's skills, knowledge and coping strategies to help them manage stress, self-regulate their emotions, know how to self-care and where to seek help if needed. The aim is to enable them to cope with the normal emotional ups and downs of teenage life.

For more detail go to SPHE (curriculumonline.ie)

The role of parents

Parents are the primary educators of their children and important partners in all aspects of the education process. NCCA has consulted with parents in developing the updated junior cycle course and will continue to consult on further SPHE developments.

Is the same SPHE curriculum taught across all schools?

There is a national curriculum for all subjects, including SPHE, that is taught across all primary and post-primary schools irrespective of the particular school ethos. The SPHE curriculum sets out the topics to be taught in schools, and teachers have freedom to choose the classroom resources they will use when teaching the curriculum. They are aware of the need to teach topics in a way that is sensitive to the age and stage of development of their students and meets their needs.

How can we ensure that the learning is age-appropriate?

In developing the curriculum, significant work goes into ensuring that learning is age-appropriate. Decisions about what to include in the curriculum are based on research and best practice, as well as extensive consultations with parents/guardians, teachers and children/young people themselves.

Within the classroom, the teacher has flexibility to judge how and when topics should be taught, so that learning takes place in a way that is meeting the needs, stage of development and school context of their students.

For further information

www.ncca.ie Go to junior cycle curriculum developments
