



Putting the 'SASS' into LGBTI+ Inclusive Schools: An Evaluation of the Safe and Supportive Schools Toolkit

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Abstract

Despite societal and legislation changes in Ireland over the last decade, schools remain sites of significant stress and harm for LGBTI+ youth. Recent survey data reveals that 76% of LGBTI+ students feel unsafe in school, with 1 in 3 students having skipped school at one point to avoid adverse treatment (BeLong To, 2022). These findings highlight the need for urgent research into evidencebased tools made available for schools and teachers to assess and challenge anti-LGBTI+ school environments. To advance this objective, this paper aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the LGBTI+ Safe and Supportive Schools (SASS) toolkit.

The SASS toolkit was developed for both BeLong To Youth Services and the Health Service Executive (HSE), and is informed by national and international good practice toolkit. It was designed to assist post-primary staff in creating safe and supportive schools that are fully inclusive of LGBTI+ young people. The SASS toolkit is of particular relevance to Boards of Management (BOM), senior management (Principal; Deputy Principal), student support teams (e.g. Care Teams; Pastoral Care Teams), coordinators and teachers of SPHE/RSE, staff involved in supporting Wellbeing, student councils and Parent Associations (PA). SASS. It is made up of six key areas, which are interconnected: *Policy and Planning, Curriculum (Teaching and Learning), Safe and Supportive Environment, Community Partnership, Direct Support to Young People, Staff Organisation and Development.*

The aim of this research study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the current SASS toolkit in achieving its overarching aim of assisting post-primary staff in creating safe and supportive schools that are fully inclusive of LGBTI+ young people. The voice of post-primary school staff is key to ensuring that the toolkit is purposeful and beneficial to the whole-school community.

This research study took place from 2020 to 2022. In total 22 post-primary schools registered to participate with 19 completing the entire research study journey: SASS online rapid tool, e-



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Learning module, Zoom training session. The research design used survey data, including both Likert scales and open-ended qualitative questions, to evaluate each of the SASS tool action areas and staff experience using the rapid assessment tool (n=752). In addition, survey data was used to evaluate the accompanying staff training and e-Learning module provided to teachers alongside the SASS tool.

The findings revealed some promising trends, including strong anti-bullying policies and beneficial community partnerships. However, the findings also highlighted some gaps for future consideration, including curriculum and facility gaps (e.g., gender-neutral toilets) and a lack of teacher confidence in dealing with homophobic or transphobic incidences. The E-learning modules were very positively received, with 90% of attendants rating the training received being of *high* or *very high* quality. Overall, data gathered in this evaluation provides a stimulus for future post-primary school based initiatives aimed at creating safe and supporting environments inclusive of LGBT+ youth, which are evidence-based and beneficial to the whole-school community.

Keywords: LGBTI+, inclusive school culture, teacher confidence, teacher professional development