Mental Health in Schools
Policy Paper

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Introduction

The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU) is the platform for cooperation between the national school student unions active in general secondary and secondary vocational education in Europe.

The policy paper on mental health gives an overview of the importance of inclusive mental health education, mental health Services, teacher’s training and supportive & preventive school environment.

This policy paper is an outcome of a year-long process within OBESSU involving the working group on mental health, ‘The Headstrong School Student Convention’ (19th-21st of November 2018) and the contributions of OBESSU Member, Candidate and Affiliate Organisations.

High Quality & Inclusive Mental Health Education

Students often feel isolated when facing mental health issues. This may be due to stigma, and lack of understanding and awareness of mental health. As students may not be familiar with the topic, they are not able to evaluate their own mental health and react appropriately, whether it be towards others or themselves. Students that face mental health issues are often at a high risk of early school leaving, as they are unable to find space and support in the educational system mental wellbeing is an essential part of people’s academic journey and overall life. Therefore, students need to be provided with the tools to help them to understand and act for their own mental health issues and the ones in their community. Having cross-curricular and inclusive mental health education, that has equal value to physical health education in national curricula would ensure that students gain the knowledge and understanding that enable them to act as aware citizens throughout their life.

Therefore, OBESSU demands:

- Mental health education to be a part of national curricula;
- Mental health education to be recognised as having equal value to physical health education;
- Mental health education to be cross-curricular.

Mental Health Services

In the 21st century, the school environment pushes students to their mental limits. The school environment is highly stressful for students that are hindered from carrying out their schoolwork. students need to be in a school environment that supports their mental health and acts as an agent of prevention for mental health deterioration. students spend a significant amount of their life within schools and they need to be holistically healthy in order to pursue their education. Often, secondary schools employ personnel to carry out medical work within each school. However, students have raised concerns on their
insufficient presence. In order to combat the current lack of support and prevention, students need professional and community support to be available throughout the school day. OBESSU believes that schools should provide the option of high quality and free-of-charge mental health services in the form of an on-site psychologist, keeping into account the students-psychologist ratio, in order to meet the high demand for mental health services. Regular mandatory check-ups with school psychologists would break the barrier of not talking about mental health.

Therefore, OBESSU demands:

- Secondary schools to ensure a supportive and preventive school environment for students;
- Secondary schools to ensure access to high quality and free of charge mental health services in schools, including through on-site psychologists;
- Adequate resources devoted to an increased presence of psychological personnel, therefore lowering the student ratio of students per psychologist in order to meet students’ needs for mental health services.

Teacher’s training

Teachers are often the people closest to students. Their role in contributing to a school environment that is supportive and preventive is crucial. Every student has different needs. When it comes to mental health needs, teachers should be trained to be able to identify these needs. Educational authorities need to implement compulsory continuous teachers’ trainings on the mental wellbeing of students recurrently.

OBESSU believes that teachers need to be provided with the knowledge and tools to detect and accordingly react to signs and potential symptoms of mental health issues. Teachers need to know where, when and how students can seek further help, both within and outside of schools.

Therefore, OBESSU demands:

- Educational authorities to organise regular, modern and mandatory teachers’ trainings on student’s mental health;
- Teachers to be equipped with the knowledge and tools to detect, accordingly react to signs and potential symptoms of mental health issues.

School Student Support

It is important for students to feel acknowledged by their peers. In order to abolish the stigma about mental health, students need peer support outside of the classroom. OBESSU believes that one crucial way of educating students about their rights and mental health is through peer-to-peer education. School student unions need to stand together, and demand that physical and mental health be recognised equally. School student unions play a fundamental role when it comes to raising awareness of mental health of students, as well as when it comes to organising educational and support activities. youth clubs, associations and other civil society organisations need to build strong alliances of support, information and capacity building.

Therefore, OBESSU demands:
● School student unions and peer support groups to be given the space inside and outside of schools to raise awareness on mental health issues;
● Governments, local institutions and schools to create ad-hoc funding opportunities to foster peer education in the field of mental health;
● Full recognition of school student unions and peer support groups as relevant actors in guaranteeing the wellbeing of school students.