



## **Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE policy)**

## **Incorporating the Relationships and Sexuality Policy (RSE policy)**

## **Mercy Secondary School Mounthawk**

## Section 1. Introduction

### SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION Context and Rationale of this policy

This policy is developed within the context of the school Mission statement below and in the context of the CEIST core values particularly those of ‘Promoting Spiritual and Human Development’ and ‘showing respect for every person’. (CEIST 2007)

*Mercy Mounthawk Catholic Voluntary Secondary School is a witnessing community*

*which fosters:*

- *The full potential of all staff and students*
- *A positive partnership between all members of the school and wider community*
- *The highest standards of teaching, learning and performance.’*

#### Overall Aims of S.P.H.E. (RSE)

The aims of the S.P.H.E. programme are

- To enable to students to develop skills for self-fulfilment and living in community
- To promote self-esteem and self-confidence
- To enable the students to develop a framework for responsible decision-making
- To provide opportunities for reflection and discussion
- To promote physical, mental and emotional health and well-being.

*(after SPHE Syllabus DES SPHE Handbook)*

The general aim of education is to contribute to the development of all aspects of the individual for personal and family life, for living in the community and for leisure. Our commitment in Mercy Mounthawk to student formation in the area of personal and social development arises out of the holistic aim of education in this school and encompasses all the dimensions of life, including the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social and environmental, and the complex interplay between these dimensions, which contributes to personal wellbeing and to positive inter-personal relationships. A young person who has a high degree of self-worth, a sense of security and a positive self-image will be more disposed to school life, will be more aware of the relationship between life-style, environment and health and be more conscious of the challenge to support personal, family and policy choices that promote health in all its dimensions.

The Social, Personal and Health Education offered to our young people is as important as any other area of the curriculum and is conducted under the umbrella of both our ‘Wellbeing’ and ‘Religious Education’ policies.

Social, personal and health education (SPHE) provides students with a unique opportunity to develop the skills and competence to learn about themselves and to care for themselves and others and to make informed decisions about their health, personal lives, and social development. Students can be enabled to participate as active and responsible adults in the personal and social

dimensions of society and to make responsible decisions that respect their own dignity and the dignity of others

### **School Ethos and S.P.H.E.**

The S.P.H.E. policy is written with regard to the ethos enshrined in the above Mission Statement of the School and in the Educational Philosophy of the Mercy Order which is founded on the Christian values of justice, truth and honesty, which permeate all aspects of school life. The thrust of this policy is care. From our perspective, as a Catholic school which sees itself as a community, our commitment to care is not 'humanistic' but rather based on the invitation of Christ - 'thou shalt love the lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your soul, and thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'. These values will be enhanced by the S.P.H.E. programme.

Finally the definition assumes a process. It speaks of the integration of the various aspects of our education system. In developing this policy we are aware that we are undertaking a journey of exploration and development. It is a journey during which we must challenge, renew and perhaps develop values. It is a journey during which we will gradually transform our school structures so that an atmosphere of care truly obtains throughout the school community.

## **Section 2. SPHE Policy Context and Rationale**

The school acknowledges that the primary responsibility for the personal development of children rests with their parents. However it also accepts, as outlined in the 1998 Education Act, its role in supporting parents in this work. Section 4 of the Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools requires schools to have an agreed policy for RSE and a suitable RSE programme in place for all students at both Junior and Senior cycle.

The policy is also developed in the context of the DES circulars M48/00 - (Syllabus) M11/03, 0023/2010 and 0037/2010 and the Education Act (1998) which specifies that:

*'A recognised school shall promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school'*

Further to this, Circular 15/2017 'Arrangements for the Implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle with particular reference to school years 2017/18 and 2018/19' The philosophy of the policy also draws on the NEPS document "Wellbeing in Post-Primary schools" and the Department of Education and Skills 'Junior Cycle wellbeing Guidelines'.

The school adopts and adheres to the DES Child Protection Procedures, Children First Legislation (2017) and has a Child Protection Policy / Child Safeguarding Statement, with the Principal as Designated Liaison Person (DLP) and the Deputy Principals as the Deputy DLPs. The RSE Policy is cognisant of all aspects of our current Child Protection Policy / Child Safeguarding Statement.

This policy is informed by:

- The Mission Statement of Mercy secondary School Mounthawk and the CEIST charter
- The WELLBEING policy in the school - section C of that policy
- The Code of Behaviour
- The Child Protection Policy / Child Safeguarding Statement
- The Internet Acceptable Use Policy
- The Special Educational Needs Policy (Draft)
- The Guidance Plan

### **Section 3      Scope of this policy**

The policy will apply to all aspects of teaching and learning about all aspects of Social, Personal and Health Education. Discussion about these aspects of human development also takes place in classes other than RSE / SPHE / Health Education. It is therefore important that all teachers are familiar with the RSE policy. The policy will apply to school staff, students, Board of Management, parents, visiting speakers and external facilitators.

#### *The connection between WELLBING, SPHE and RSE policies*

As outlined in section a of the 'Wellbeing policy' the overall context of the Culture of the school is foundational in providing the context for SPHE/RSE education as core values are developed and promoted through overall culture. We believe the ways in which every member of staff relates to one another and to the students, and the quality of relationships between the students themselves, form the foundation for personal and social development in a school. This is a theme developed in Section B of the 'wellbeing policy'. Consequently, every teacher, every class and extracurricular activity offers opportunities for enhancing the personal and social development of the students. Mercy Mounthawk aims to create an environment which fully supports SPHE and where:

- People feel valued
- Self-esteem is fostered
- Respect, tolerance and fairness are evident
- High expectations and standards are promoted
- There is support for those with difficulties
- Open communication is the norm
- Effort is recognised and rewarded
- Uniqueness and difference is valued
- Conflict is handled constructively
- Initiative and creativity are encouraged
- Social, moral and civic values are promoted.

### **Section 4 practical issues in relation to SPHE**

## Section 5 RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY POLICY (RSE Policy)

Within the overall context of the SPHE programme and the ethos of the school as outlined above, our RSE policy is nested. The RSE policy acknowledges the importance of RSE being taught in the context of Wellbeing / SPHE Health Education and a whole-school climate that is inclusive and respectful.

SPHE / Wellbeing provide opportunities for students to develop personal and social skills which foster integrity, self-confidence and self-esteem while nurturing sensitivity to the feelings and rights of others. The Guidelines for RSE state that SPHE is 'spiral, developmental in nature and age-appropriate in content and methodology.' (NCCA, 1995, 1.2). The RSE programme is designed to follow this principle and pattern. SPHE covers areas such as self-esteem, assertiveness, communication and decision-making skills – all of which can contribute to the effectiveness of the RSE programme. SPHE adds the dimension to education of empowering people to manage their own lives.

By providing RSE through an SPHE programme we teach students personal skills to increase their personal effectiveness so that, in the context of their own lives, they are able to make informed divisions in relation to their sexuality and relationships with others. Currently, SPHE is part of the Junior Cycle timetable as well as Transition Year, Fifth and Sixth Year timetables. The RSE module is taught to all Junior Cycle classes for six to ten class periods after the Christmas Holidays in January - February. At Senior Cycle, the Transition, Fifth and Sixth Year Health Education classes participate in the RSE module, which is usually scheduled between October and Christmas. There is continued emphasis on health and well-being, responsibility and decision-making throughout the RSE programme.

The school's RSE policy guides teachers in the treatment of issues in accordance with the ethos of the school. It is important that teachers of RSE understand that their role is to express the views of the whole school community on these sensitive issues, and not their own personal views. In this regard, it should be noted that:

1. Schools are required to deliver all aspects of the RSE curriculum, including those in relation to sexual orientation, contraception, sexually transmitted infections etc. This can be done within the context in which the teaching of the programme is informed by the school ethos.
2. A school can express its ethos while at the same time facilitating students in discussing a range of views in relation to topics within the RSE programme.

### 5.1 *Aims of the RSE programme in Mercy Mounthawk*

- To build on the primary school programme which strives to help young people learn at home and at school about their own development and about their friendships and relationships with others.
- To promote an understanding of sexuality.

- To promote a positive attitude towards one's own sexuality and one's relationships with others.
- To enable students to develop attitudes and values towards their sexuality in a moral, spiritual and social framework.
- To promote knowledge of and respect for human reproduction.
- To provide young people with information and skills to evaluate critically the wide range of information, opinions, attitudes and values offered today, in order that they will make positive, responsible, moral, caring and responsible decisions about themselves and the way they live their lives, while also respecting the dignity of others.
- The school recognises that parents are the primary educators and home is the natural and primary environment in which RSE should take place.

## **5.2 Scope and aims of this section on RSE**

- The policy ensures clarity and consensus on how RSE is taught in the school.
- It articulates the relationship of RSE to SPHE.
- It articulates the aims of the RSE programme.
- It clarifies the rights, roles and responsibilities of all within the school community in relation to the RSE programme, with particular reference to school staff, students, parents and the Board of Management.
- It ensures that teachers, parents and students understand how the teaching of RSE is linked to the school ethos.
- It provides information on the practicalities of delivering the programme.

What the School Currently Provides Formal examples of RSE in action in Mercy Mounthawk include the teaching of 'TRUST' - Teaching relationships, understanding sexuality teaching for Senior Cycle, the 'Growing Up Gay and Bisexual in Ireland' programme (SPHE-PDST) and 'Lockers' (SPHE-PDST). All Junior and Senior classes receive a minimum of six class periods of RSE in each academic year.

Some aspects of RSE are approached during subjects such as Biology, CSPE, Guidance and Counselling, Home Economics, Physical Education, Religious Education and Science. Some are taught informally using a cross curricular approach and support what is taught in Junior Cycle SPHE (see SPHE Policy) [e.g. CSPE / RE – values, rights and responsibilities]. Where there are cross-curricular links with SPHE / RSE the school ethos is respected at all times and informs what is taught. The RSE programme is supported by the Pastoral Care system and by the Management and Staff of the school.

## **Section 6. General guidelines for the provision and organisation of SPHE and RSE in Mercy Mounthawk**

### **6.1 Timetabling of SPHE and RSE**

SPHE is an integral part of the Wellbeing / SPHE programme and is timetabled in all Junior Cycle classes. Health Education is timetabled in all Senior Cycle classes. RSE is taught to Transition Year, Fifth Year and Sixth Year students within a designated period in the RE timetable and in separate classes. The programme is delivered in a mixed setting of boys and girls.

Students with Additional Needs: Students who have additional educational needs may need more help than others in coping with the physical and emotional aspects of growing up. They may also need more help in learning what sorts of behaviour are and are not acceptable, and in being warned and prepared against abuse by others.

## **6.2 Guest Speakers in SPHE and RSE**

Outside speakers are sometimes invited into the SPHE / RSE class to facilitate learning on specific aspects of the programme e.g. Rape Crisis Centre facilitates the KAS programme with Transition Year students. a) It is school policy that most of the SPHE / RSE programme is best discussed openly with teachers who are known and trusted by the students. However, visitors can enhance the quality of the provision as long as they are used in addition to, not instead of, a planned programme of SPHE / RSE. b) The SPHE Co-ordinator / RSE teacher will inform the visitor, well in advance of the visit, of this RSE policy on the school website, and request that they familiarise themselves with its content. After gaining approval from the Principal for the visit the organiser makes the visitor aware of the ethos of the school and the manner of delivery of the SPHE / RSE programme.

Issues to consider include: i) The degree of explicitness of the content and presentation. ii) Will the visitor be accompanied by teaching staff? iii) Will the teaching staff take an active role in the visitor's activities? iv) How will the visitor be prepared for the visit? v) How will the visit be built upon and followed up? c) Visitors should be given advance notice of the composition of the class and an idea of how their contribution fits into the scheme of work. d) In order to inform the visitor of the precise requirements of a group and to make better use of the time of the visitor it is advisable, though not mandatory, for the group to draw up questions in advance and these should be forwarded to the visitor. This will involve the students in the visit and will make the experience more relevant for them - it also facilitates planning. e) The Principal, Deputy Principals and the Administration Office staff should be informed of the date and name of the visitor. f) Where applicable, refreshments should be arranged. g) The visitor should be welcomed at the main door. h) At the end of the session a vote of thanks should be given by a student and the visitor escorted to the main door after refreshments. i) A written acknowledgement of their contribution should be sent to the visitor and could appear in the Weekly Schools News in the local media / school's social media platforms.

## **6.3 Provision of Support, Training and Staff Development:**

- A Co-ordinator of SPHE has been provided,
- Teachers are encouraged and facilitated to attend RSE and SPHE training,
- Teachers of RSE and SPHE have access to teaching materials and resources,
- Teachers who express an interest in SPHE / RSE will be given consideration.

## **6.4 Inclusion of Parents:**

The Parents' Council is consulted on the design and review of the SPHE / RSE policy.

The views expressed by parents will be taken into account when reviewing the policy.

Parents have a responsibility to inform themselves of the SPHE /RSE programme content and to prepare their sons / daughters for the information they will acquire around the sensitive areas covered in RSE. The RSE policy is available to download from [www.mercymounthawk.ie](http://www.mercymounthawk.ie) or a copy may be requested by a parent from the school office. Parents are asked to familiarise themselves with the policy content.

Parents of all students are notified by letter at least one week in advance of the RSE module commencement

While all partners in the school community - teaching staff, students, parents and management - are agreed on the programme, we recognise, nevertheless, the right of any parent who so wishes to request that his/her daughter should not participate in the programme.

#### **6.4.1 *Withdrawing students from the RSE programme***

- I. The Education Act (1998; section 30, subsection (2)(e)) provides that a student is not required to attend instruction in any subject which is contrary to the conscience of the parent or in the case of a student who has reached the age of eighteen years, the student. Parents have a right therefore to withdraw their son / daughter from all or any aspect of RSE. Parents must notify the Principal in advance of their wish to have their child withdrawn from all or part of the programme. The school may wish to ask the parents to put their request in writing.
- II. Issues such as overpopulation and birth control are met in a minor way in subjects such as Geography and RE. However, as any discussion is limited and set within the context of the other subject concerned, it does not constitute part of the formal RSE Programme.
- III. Parents do not have to give reasons for withdrawal, but we respectfully invite them to do so – we aim to resolve misunderstandings if possible. Once a parent’s written request to withdraw is made, that request must be complied with until revoked by the parent.
- IV. If a student is withdrawn from the lessons pertaining to the sensitive elements of the RSE programme, parents must give a notice in writing to the school that they are withdrawing their child. The student may be accommodated in another teacher’s classroom in the school.

What we do if a request for withdrawal from the RSE programme is made by a parent:

- I. We discuss the nature of the concerns with the student’s parent and, if appropriate, attempt to reassure them (initially such discussion takes place at a meeting with the RSE teacher but the Principal may become involved if necessary).
- II. We consider whether the programme can be amended or improved in a way that will reassure parents - care is taken not to undermine the integrity of the RSE programme and the entitlement of the other students.
- III. We attempt to ensure that where a student is withdrawn from RSE there is no disruption to other parts of their education.
- IV. We point out that students who have been withdrawn may be vulnerable to teasing - we therefore attempt to cause minimal embarrassment to the student and minimal disruption to the programme.
- V. We also point out that students may sometimes receive inaccurate information from their peers.

- VI. We offer parents access to appropriate information and resources.

## **Section 7. Ethical / Moral Considerations – Guidelines for Teachers**

### **7.1. Answering Explicit Questions**

It is natural that students should wish to ask questions in the area of SPHE / RSE. While it is important to create an environment in SPHE /RSE in which students can discuss issues openly, teachers may not be able to answer all questions asked by students and can set appropriate limits. If any questions asked by students are deemed to be inappropriate, the teacher will refer the student to their parents or state that this information may be available at a later stage of the curriculum. Teachers may choose to say that it is not appropriate to deal with that question at this time. If a teacher becomes concerned about a matter that has been raised he/she should seek advice from the Principal. When deciding whether or not to answer questions the teacher should consider the age and readiness of the students, the RSE programme content, the ethos of the school, the RSE policy and use their professional judgment. With regard to matters of a confidential nature, the school cannot take any responsibility for what is discussed among students outside of the RSE lesson.

### **7.2. Confidentiality**

Teachers strive to create a safe learning environment for all students. While students should not be encouraged to disclose personal or private information in SPHE / RSE classes, there may be times when they talk about their own lives. It is important that students are made aware of the limits of confidentiality and that teachers do not give unconditional guarantees of confidentiality. Confidentiality should be respected unless the teacher feels that the child is at risk or where there are reasonable grounds to believe that a law may be broken. In such a case, the appropriate action should be taken in accordance with the procedures set down in the Child Protection Procedures for Post-Primary Schools, the school's Child Protection Policy / Child Safeguarding Statement and the Children First legislation (2017) or the school's Substance Abuse Policy, i.e. the teacher must inform the Designated Liaison Person, and ensure that that all reporting procedures are complied with.

### **7.3. Sexual Activity**

Teachers should give young people information on the age of consent which, following the passage of Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2006, is seventeen years of age for both males and females. In all cases where the school becomes aware of underage sexual activity the school will take appropriate steps to inform the child's parents, in accordance with Children First legislation.

### **7.4. Out-of-School Factors**

The school also recognises the many out-of-school factors which affect the development of a positive attitude to sexuality during adolescence - the social lives of students, the relationships they form, their behaviour within these relationships, the peer expectations of relationships, the reading material of students, their exposure to sexually explicit material / pornography on video / smart phones, television and through music. The RSE programme will attempt to heighten the students' awareness of the influences of these forces on the development of their values and attitudes and empower them to make informed decisions and choices.

### **7.5. *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Identities, Sexual Orientations and Related Issues***

Teachers do not promote any one life-style as the only acceptable one for society and therefore it is inevitable and natural that sexual orientation, sexual identity and gender identity will be discussed during a programme of sex education. One of the advantages of exploring LGBT+ identities and issues is the opportunity to correct false ideas, assumptions and address prejudice. Discussion of sexual and gender identity and sexual orientation should be appropriate to the age of the students.

**7.6. *Sensitive Issues e.g. Sexual Activity, Abortion and Contraception Sensitive topics*** will be dealt with in an age-appropriate, open manner, looking at all sides of the issues in a non-directive way, within the context of the school's ethos and DES-NCCA guidelines. SPHE / RSE teachers give young people information on the age of consent which, following the passage of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act, 2006, is seventeen years of age for both males and females. The post-primary RSE Curriculum Guidelines state that the subject of family planning should be covered within the Senior Cycle RSE programme. There is a lesson on family planning in the RSE Senior Cycle Resource Materials on P77. The RSE programme requires that young people are provided with information about methods of contraception, and this is done within the values and moral framework of the ethos of Presentation College, Carlow.

## **Section 8 Implementation Arrangements, Roles and Responsibilities**

The Board of Management has assigned the role of co-ordinating the implementation of this policy to the Principal and the SPHE Co-ordinator

This policy is ratified by the Board of Management and is the agreed policy of Mercy Secondary school Mounthawk. All teaching staff will need to be familiar with this policy and aware of any changes implied in curriculum delivery.

The Board of Management and Senior Management Team are committed to ensuring access to CPD opportunities for all teachers involved in SPHE and RSE, to providing relevant RSE school resources and to supporting efforts of parents to provide educational opportunities for other parents.

Senior Management and the Board of Management facilitate teachers to participate in professional development opportunities, with due regard to the school budget and Supervision/Substitution rota, and the need for the ongoing teaching and learning programme of the school to continue with as little disturbance as possible.

Any teacher has the right to opt out of teaching the sensitive elements of RSE, following reasonable notification to the Principal. It is the responsibility of the Board of Management to ensure content is covered by another teacher or an outside speaker.

## Section 9. Policy Review

The policy will be reviewed and evaluated every two years under the direction of the Board of Management. On-going review and evaluation will take cognisance of changing information, guidelines, legislation and feedback from parents, students, teachers and others. The policy will be revised as necessary in the light of such review and evaluation and within the framework of school self-evaluation and policy planning.

To review and evaluate the policy, it will be necessary to gauge the impact and effectiveness of the policy by examining the extent to which:

- SPHE and RSE is being successfully taught to all students.
- Resource materials are available to teachers
- The timetable facilitates the implementation of the RSE programme e.g. at Senior Cycle, that all classes at Senior Cycle are taught RSE.
- Appropriate professional development for teachers is available and relevant teachers are availing of it.
- Staff are aware of the policy.
- Students are aware of the policy.
- Parents are aware of the policy.

Specifically important to the review and evaluation of the SPHE and RSE Policy and Programme are:

- Student feedback: A confidential survey of students is conducted once the RSE lessons are completed. Feedback is sought from the Student Council.
- Staff review and feedback.
- Parental feedback, including at parent-teacher meetings and Parents' Council meetings.
- Feedback is sought as part of our School Self-Evaluation process and helps to inform future planning.

Ratified by the Board of Management on: 17<sup>th</sup> December 2018

Date of next review: February 2020

Signature (Chairperson): \_\_\_\_\_