



ombudsman
do leanaí
for children

TOMORROW STARTS WITH US

A children's survey on the future of Ireland
to mark the 20th Anniversary of the
Ombudsman for Children's Office



Foreword

OCO 20th Anniversary Survey

This year marks a major milestone for the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) as we celebrate 20 years since its establishment in 2004. Like for anyone or any organisation, anniversaries are important because they force us to pause and reflect on what's come before and reassess where we need to be in the future. As the name of our survey *Tomorrow Starts with Us* suggests, the success of our future lies in the steps we take today to guarantee that future for our children. So who better to ask than those we work for, the children of Ireland, how that future should look and what we, as defenders of children's rights, should be prioritising.

This survey to mark the 20th Anniversary of the OCO has thrown up some really insightful, illuminating and at times quite stark, findings. Children tell us they are most concerned about mental health services, their future housing needs and the cost of living; all issues that dominate the opinion polls and occupy the front pages of newspapers. Yet these issues are not necessarily treated as 'children's issues' by those in power, who can therefore recuse themselves from prioritising children on decisions relating to these big ticket items.

One thing that concerns me particularly is the fact that children rarely feel listened to by adults; by politicians and policy makers or by teachers. Including children's views in decisions that affect them is not only our duty under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child but it also makes for better and more effective policies. And we know that children have strong views on many issues. On the future of education for example, children have a very clear picture of what they would like school life to look like. They are asking for more emphasis on student wellbeing (77%), for more vocational training options (64%) and for a wider selection of subjects to study (60%). The majority of children we surveyed (59%) also want less emphasis on exam results and 75% want less homework. When asked what the OCO's future priorities should be, equality in education and enhancing student support were also highlighted by students. With children the primary stakeholders in education, who are we not to listen to them?

We also see that children are not immune from the worrying rise of anti-immigrant sentiment both in Ireland and around the world, with 36% experiencing discrimination and 15% racism. They have offered solutions on how to tackle these issues and it is clear that we need to get to grips quickly with this rising problem and tackle it head on. When it comes to the scourge of bullying, it is truly upsetting to see that almost half (47%) of our children have experienced bullying and this holds steady across all age groups,



regions and whether a child is in a DEIS (52%) or a non DEIS (44%) school. We know from complaints to our office that bullying remains a major issue in schools and this survey has reinforced that. This should provide the motivation to push on with work in this area and to drive for real progress.

When asked about their lives online children have told us it is a place of fun for them to express themselves but over 50% also said they are concerned about online safety. Children are living online and it is incumbent on me as Ombudsman, and on the Government, to work tirelessly to ensure that space is safe for them.

There is a lot for us to take from this survey and learnings to be had that will inform the work of our Office in the coming years. I am also committed to ensuring the powerful messages of the 1,000+ children surveyed for our 20th Anniversary are elevated to policy makers in this and future Governments. Finally, I would like to extend míle buíochas to the 23 schools and children that took time out of their busy lives to take part in our survey. Your voices will not go unheard and rest assured, will help to shape our priorities in the years to come.

Dr Niall Muldoon

Ombudsman for Children



Methodology

Tomorrow Starts with Us - A children's survey on the future of Ireland to mark the 20th Anniversary of the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) was carried out by the OCO in conjunction with Amárach Research.

A total of 1,036 children and young people from across Ireland took part. The online survey was open to children aged 12 – 18 years in secondary schools. A small number of students (7%) aged 18 and over who are still in school also completed the survey.

The OCO wrote to 257 secondary schools to invite them to take part in the survey; based on regional spread, deis, non-deis, gaelscoileanna, private schools and schools that had taken part in Education Rights Awareness workshops at the OCO. Schools were also invited to take part through social media and the survey was shared with the OCO Youth Advisory Panel. The survey was open to all students in 1st – 6th year.

The topics in the survey were based on issues raised with the OCO by children, as well as some of the main issues that the Office has been working on. The survey aimed to capture school children's views on a range of areas: how they feel about living in Ireland today, education, discrimination, racism and bullying, mental health, online safety and social media use, as well as capturing their opinions on where OCO priorities should focus over the next 5 years.

Once a school signed up to take part in the survey, it was still up to the individual student whether they wanted to participate. Children's participation was anonymous and only the school was identifiable.

An information sheet for students was supplied at the beginning of every survey that included a list of support services for the student if needed. Every effort was made to ensure that questions were simply phrased and understandable to all age groups, and to ensure that children were not led or encouraged to opt for any particular outcome.

Fieldwork was carried out from February 29th to April 22nd 2024. Amárach supported the OCO with survey design and scripting, online survey hosting and coding/data analysis.



Summary

1,036

students took part in our survey from 23 schools across Ireland.

The survey was carried out from February 29th to April 22nd.

71%

of students surveyed rate Ireland as being good as a country where children can reach their potential, with 62% rating the education system as being very good or good.

40%

report the standard of public transport currently available to them has a positive effect on their quality of life, with just 20% reporting a negative effect.

60%

think Ireland is accessible for disabled children and children with additional needs, with just 14% disagreeing.

Overall, students feel their opinions are not being considered when decisions are being made about children: Just 7% for politicians and policy makers, 28% for teachers and classrooms assistants, and 18% for other adults when making decisions about children.

The top issues for students in Ireland are:

- **the cost of living (44%)**
- **mental health services (40%)**
- **housing in the future (33%)**

Mental health and student wellbeing are areas of importance to students highlighted throughout the survey results.





Summary

Education

When asked to consider the future curriculum in schools, students overwhelmingly want an increased focus on the overall wellbeing of the student (77%) and the focus on mental health issues and supports (75%), while a decrease in the amount of homework (75%) and emphasis on exams and exam results (59%).

There is also significant desire for greater participation by students in the future of our schools and education system, with 83% believing there should be more involvement by students in making decisions about their school. Over 8 in 10 (81%) would like different learning styles in the education system, and 69% want increased action from schools on bullying.

Reducing homework and emphasising continuous assessment (25%), followed by enhancing student well-being (22%), and improving teaching styles (21%) are the top changes to the Irish education system students would like to see to make it the best in the world.

Mental Health in Schools

40% state they would make use of a therapist at their school if they had access to them, with **52%** saying they would be unlikely to.

Discrimination, Racism and Bullying

36% report having experienced discrimination.

15% of students report having experienced racism.

47% of students say they have experienced bullying.

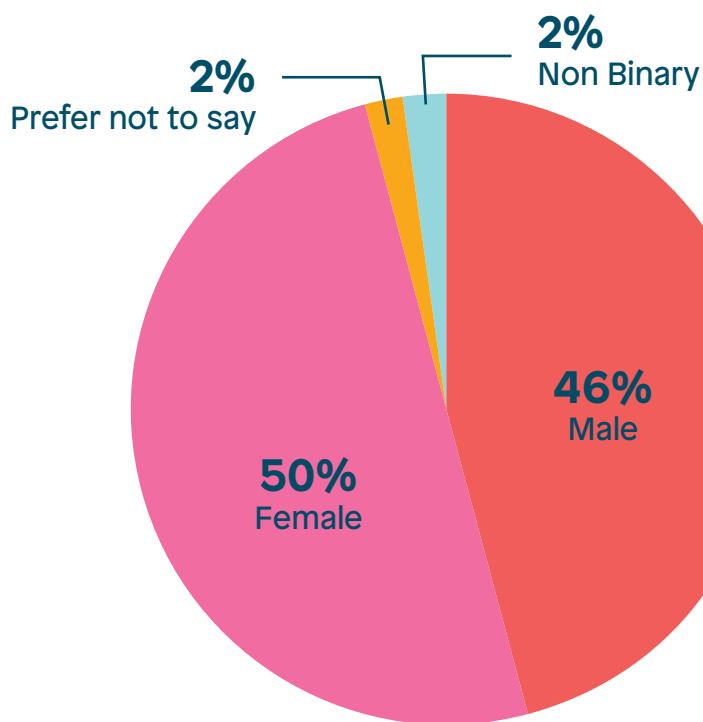
Online Safety and Social Media

60% report sharing moments from their life on social media.

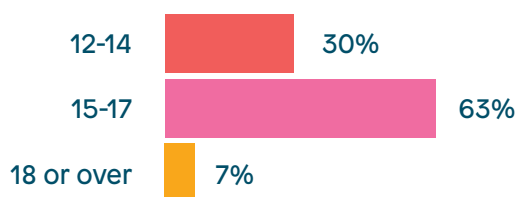
51% of students surveyed report being concerned about online safety.

When asked what needs to happen to ensure children are safe online, more education for children (45%) ranks top, followed by more education for parents (37%), and ensuring social media platforms create child friendly spaces (36%).

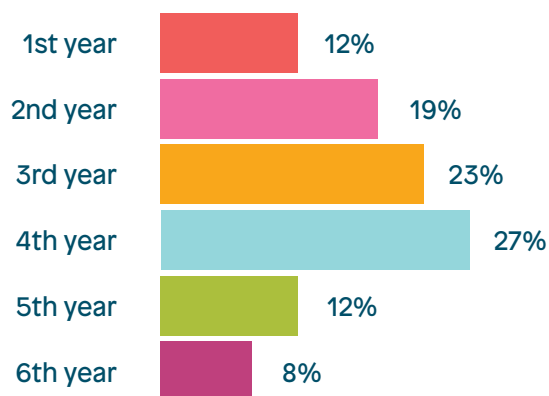
Who took part?



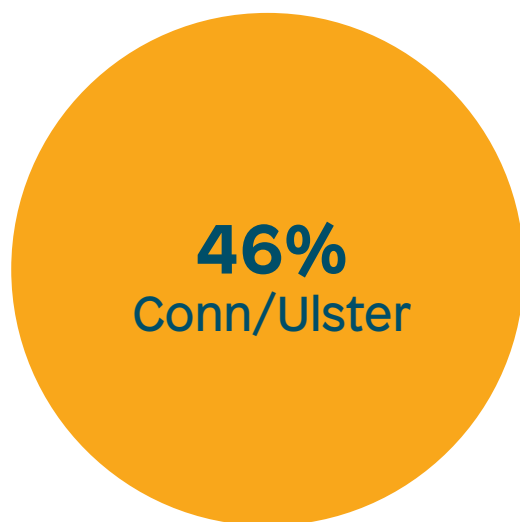
Age



School year

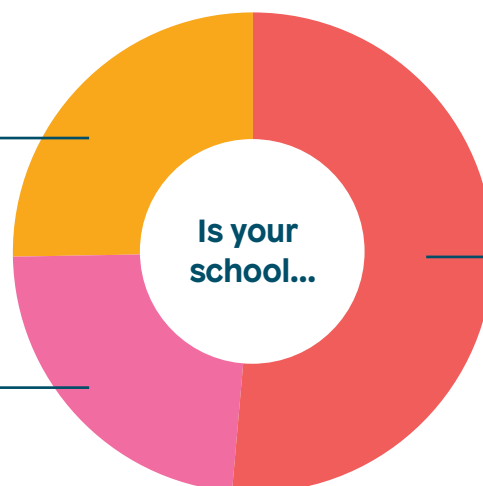


Total children surveyed 1,036



25%
A DEIS school

23%
Don't know

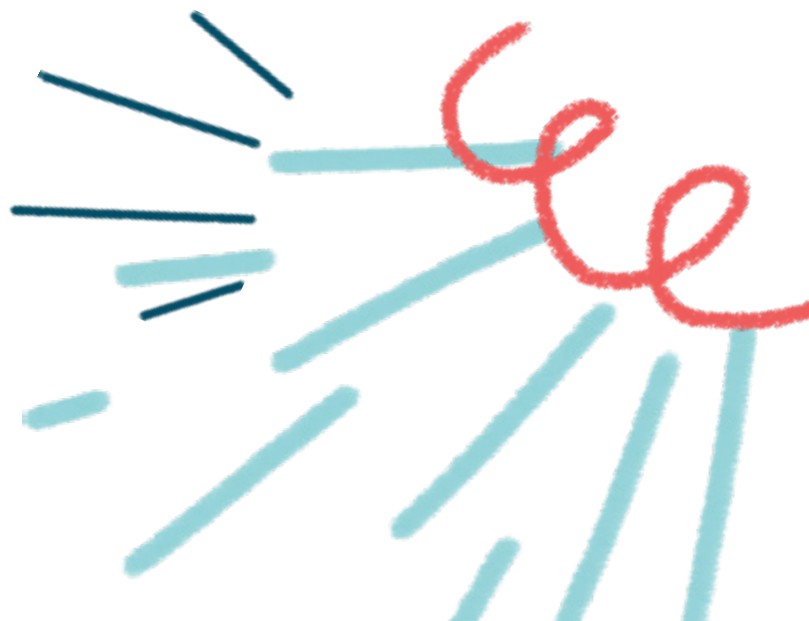
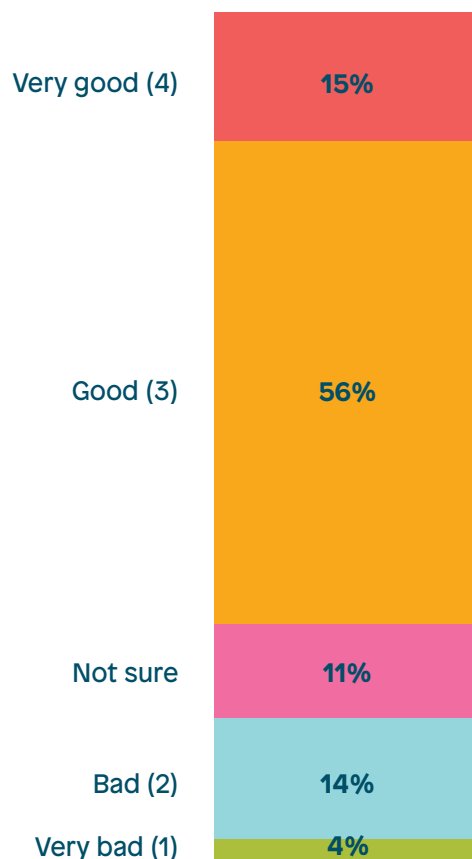


52%
Non-DEIS

Q1

How would you rate Ireland as a country where children can reach their potential?

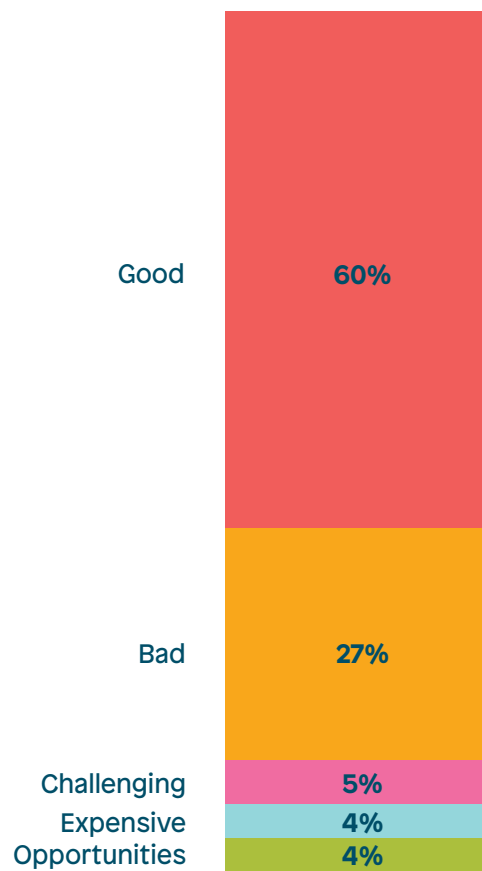
Overall, **71%** of young people rate Ireland as being very good or good as a country where children can reach their potential.



Q2

Describe Ireland for children in one word. This can be any word that sums up how you feel about Ireland?

When asked to describe Ireland for children in one word, **60% of children used positive terms while 27% used negative words.** Younger children were more likely to have positive views.



Problematic

boring

Inclusive

unfulfilling

interesting

creative

Difficult

Mediocre

Friendly

Spreaghadh

Dangerous

welcoming

challenging

Privileged

Engaging

struggle

Rainy

Behind

safe!!

fair

unfair

Disappointing
(mental health services)

Míshábháilte

Wonderful

ignorant

Ró chostasach

stressful

happy

amazing

Tá eire class

Traditional

Deas

Pressuring

scary

Exceptional

Expensive

Engaging

Miserable

Diverse

tough

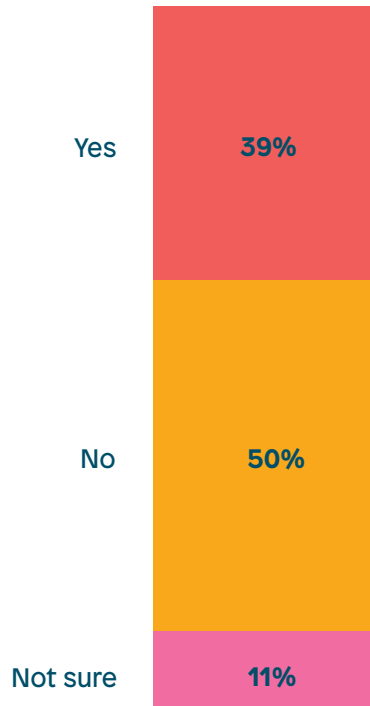
Compoirdeach

limited

Q3

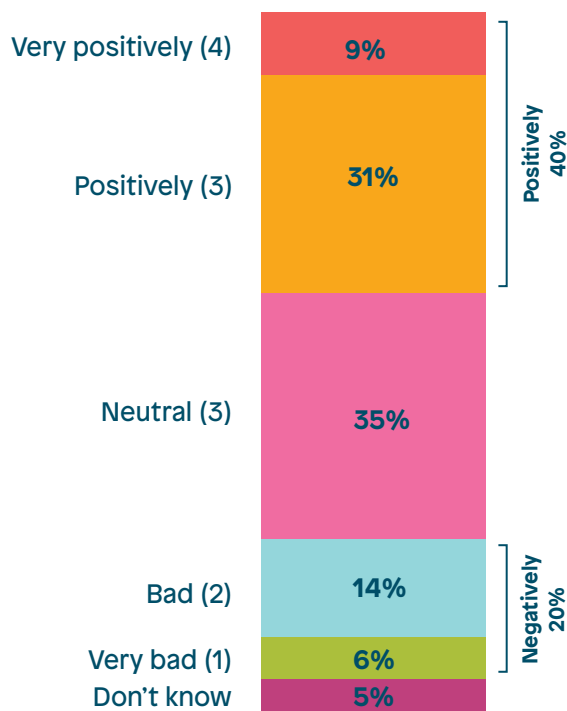
Do you think young people in Ireland should be able to vote at age 16?

39% believe young people in Ireland should be able to vote at age 16.



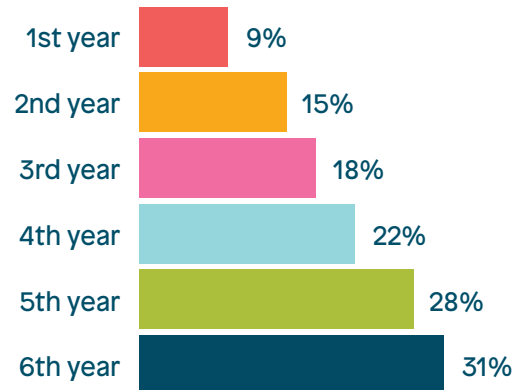
Q4 How does the standard of public transport that is currently available to you affect your quality of life?

40% of young people report the standard of public transport currently available to them has a positive effect on their quality of life, with **20%** stating it has a negative effect. Older age groups are significantly more likely to report negative effects.



Children who said Public Transport impacts them negatively

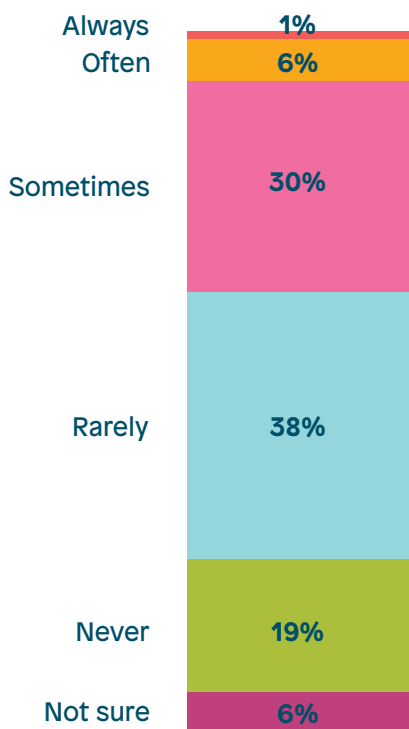
School year



Listening to Children

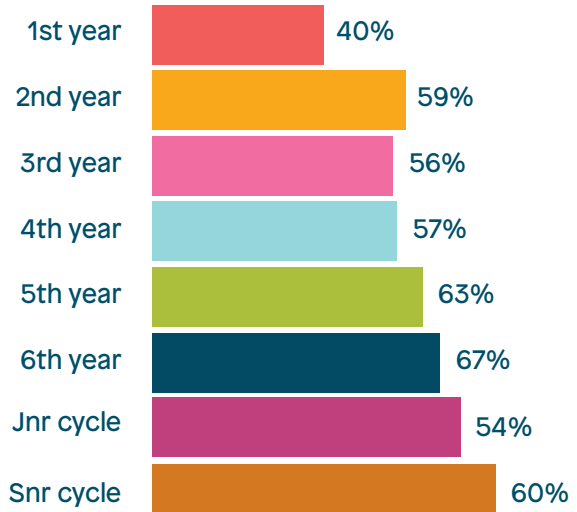
Q5 Do you think young people's opinions are considered by politicians and policy makers when making decisions about children?

Just **7%** think young people's opinions are considered by politicians and policy makers when making decisions about children, with **38%** saying rarely, and **19%** never. Older age groups are among the most likely to state rarely.



Children who said rarely

School year

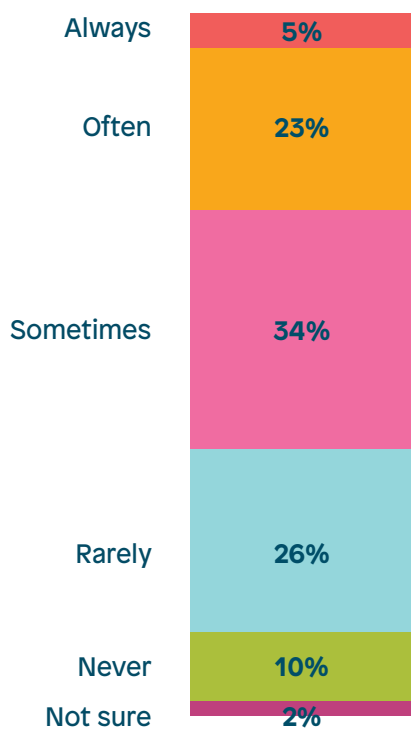


School



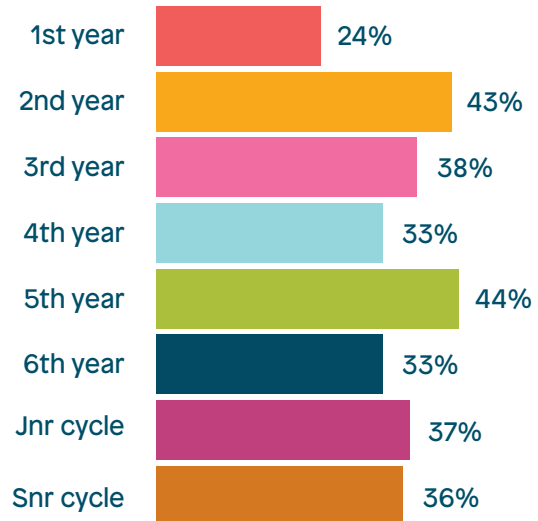
Q6 Do you think young people's opinions are considered in school by teachers, classrooms assistants and others when making decisions about children?

28% of children feel they are listened to by teachers, classroom assistants and others but 36% feel they are rarely or never listened to



Children who said rarely

School year



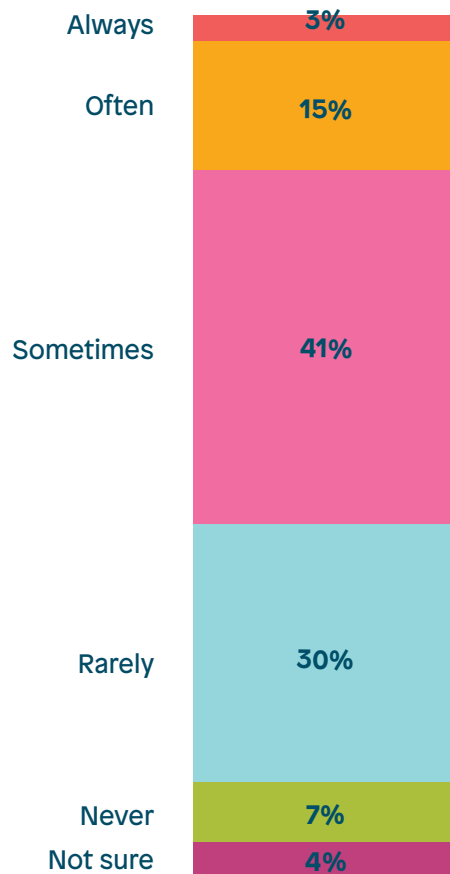
School



Q7

Do you think young people's opinions are considered by **other adults** when making decisions about children?

18% think young people's opinions are considered by other adults when making decisions about children, with twice as many (**37%**) stating rarely.

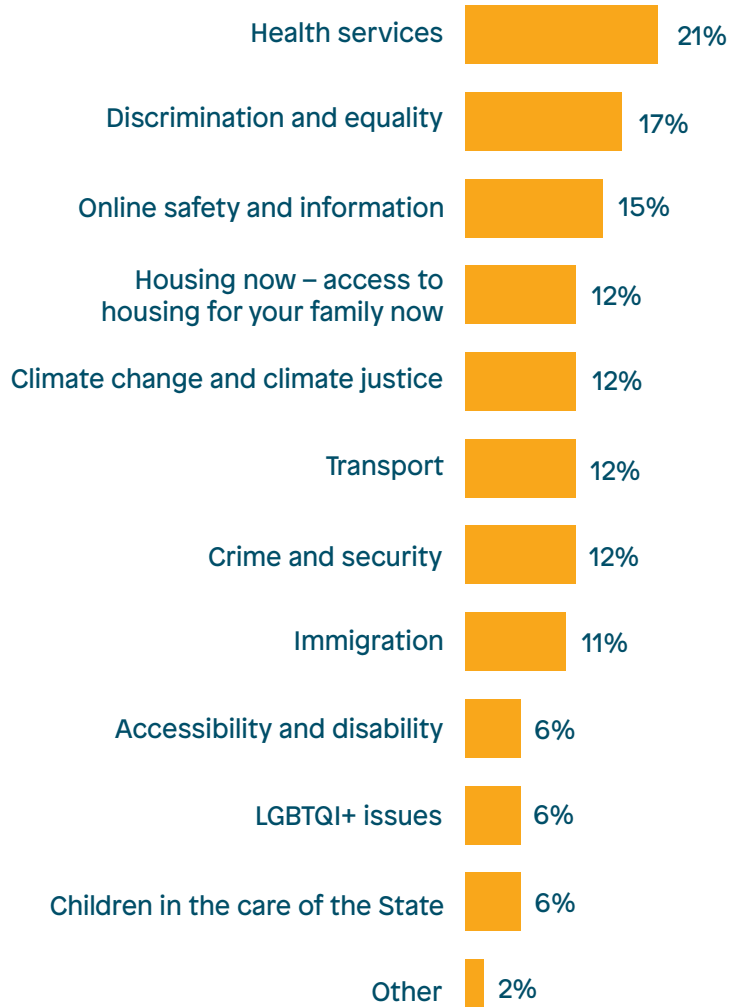
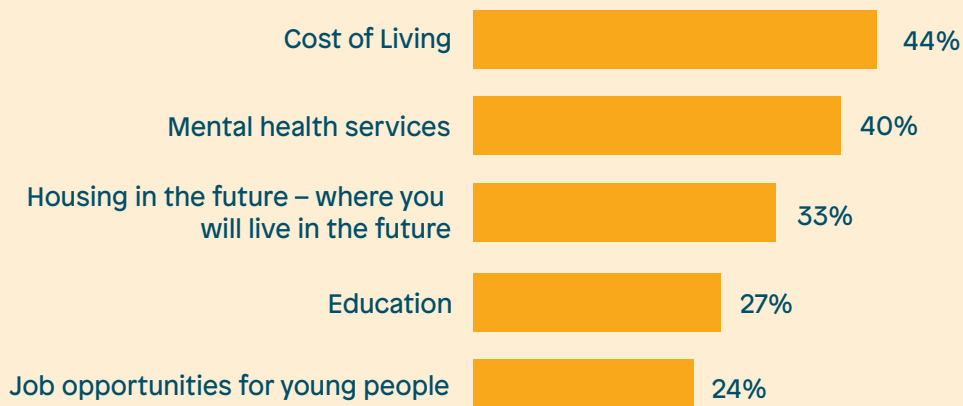


Q8

What are the big issues for young people? Select your top 5 in order of importance, with 1 being the most important?

Cost of living (44%), mental health services (40%), and housing in the future (33%) are the top big issues for young people.

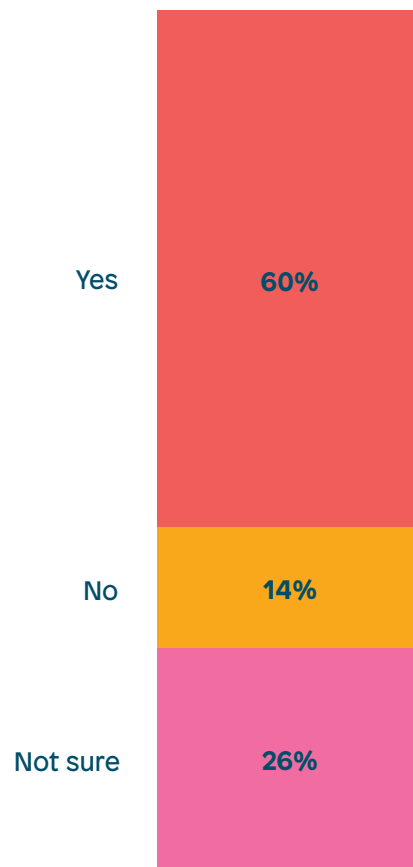
TOP 5



Q9

Do you think Ireland is accessible for disabled children and children with additional needs (physical, sensory or intellectual)?

60% of children think Ireland is accessible for disabled children and children with additional needs, with 14% disagreeing.



Reduce waiting lists, work on overall health system, doctors need to work on duty of care and start caring more about the people rather than the money

Reduce waiting lists, work on overall health system, doctors need to work on duty of care and start caring more about the people rather than the money

Have the government give them more funding in the budget

physically: ramps for wheelchairs
mentally: sensory areas etc

Nuair atá cinne le dheanamh smaonigh faoi an tionchar a beidh ann le haghaidh leanbh agus chonas a feabhsú agus go háirithe in áiteanna poiblí

more transport and step free access to places. more support for them

Increases awareness about all kinds of disabilities and less segregation

There could be more awareness about accessibility for accessibility and more services available for young people. Schools should be able to accommodate every child's individual needs

More transport for children with disabilities

they could be more inclusive in decision making and introduce alternative options

wider range of facilities

Níos mó seirbhísí agus airgead a cur isteach i seirbhísí sláinte, oideachas srl do páistí le mí chumas fisiciúil agus meabhrach chomh maith le níos mó eolas a cur amach faoi mí chumas

Wheelchair friendly transport and schools. More help for intellectual disabilities

More units in school and more ramps

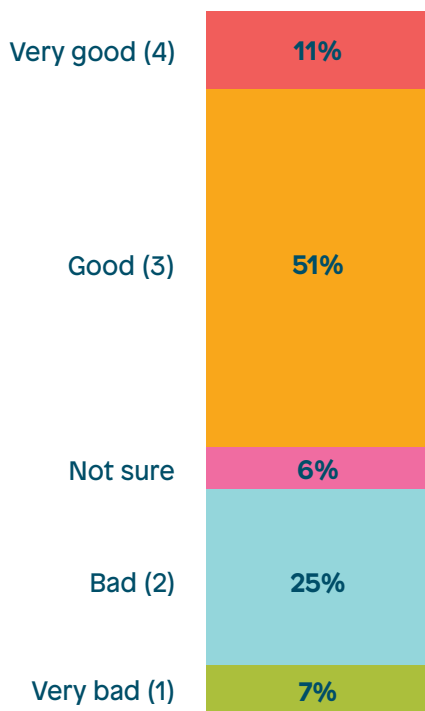
Severe shortage of medical professionals and extremely long waiting lists, this needs to be remedied ASAP

prioritise the children's needs. there is a serious lack of help and support available for any neurodivergent, whom all have the upmost potential to do as well as any other person but are not given the right tools to get there and instead have to figure out

More wheelchair access in towns

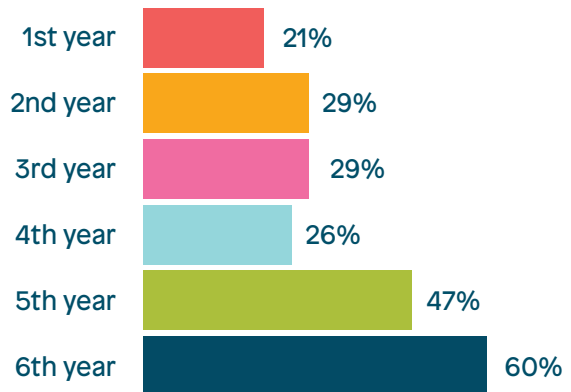
Q10 How would you rate the education system in Ireland?

62% of students rate the education system in Ireland as being very good or good, with 32% rating it as very bad or bad.



Children who said bad

School year



Q11

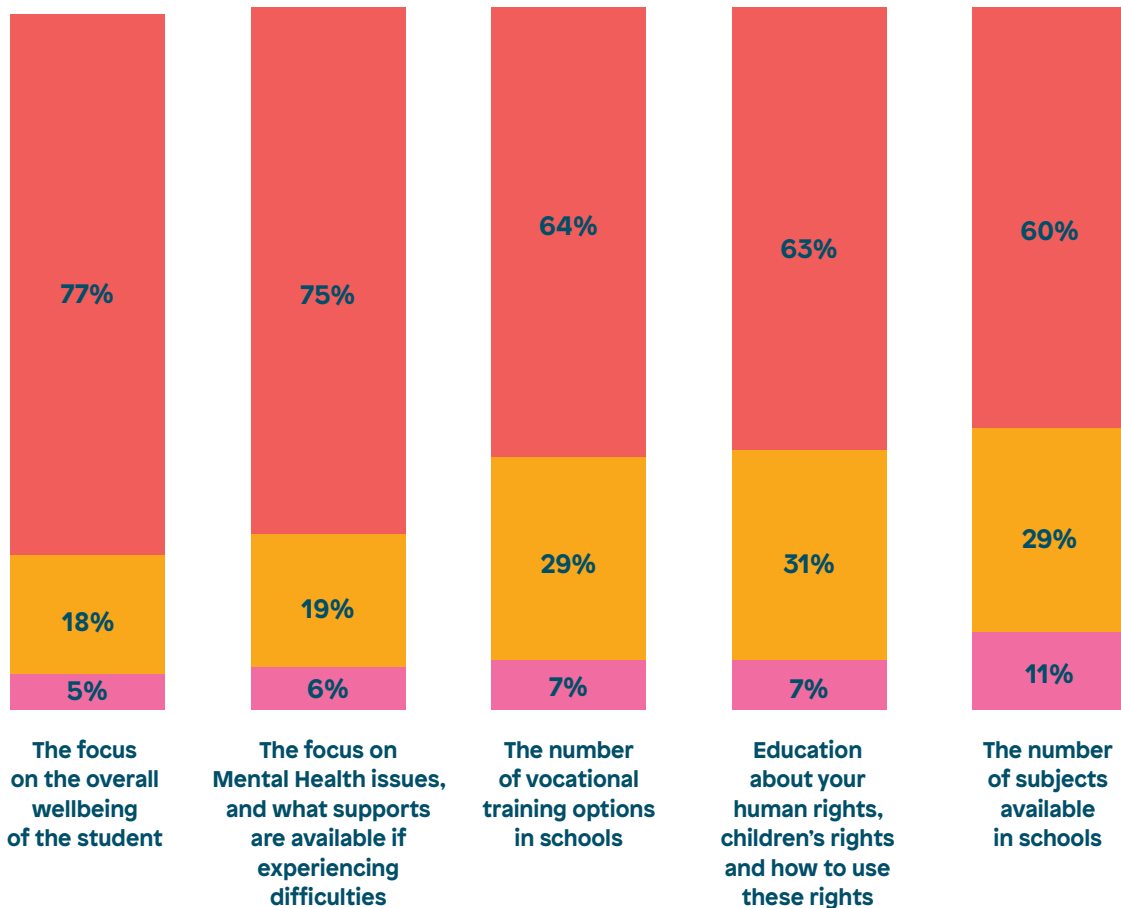
Looking to the future curriculum in schools, do you think there should be more or less of the following:

Students feel strongly there should be an increase in focus on overall student wellbeing and mental health issues...

● More

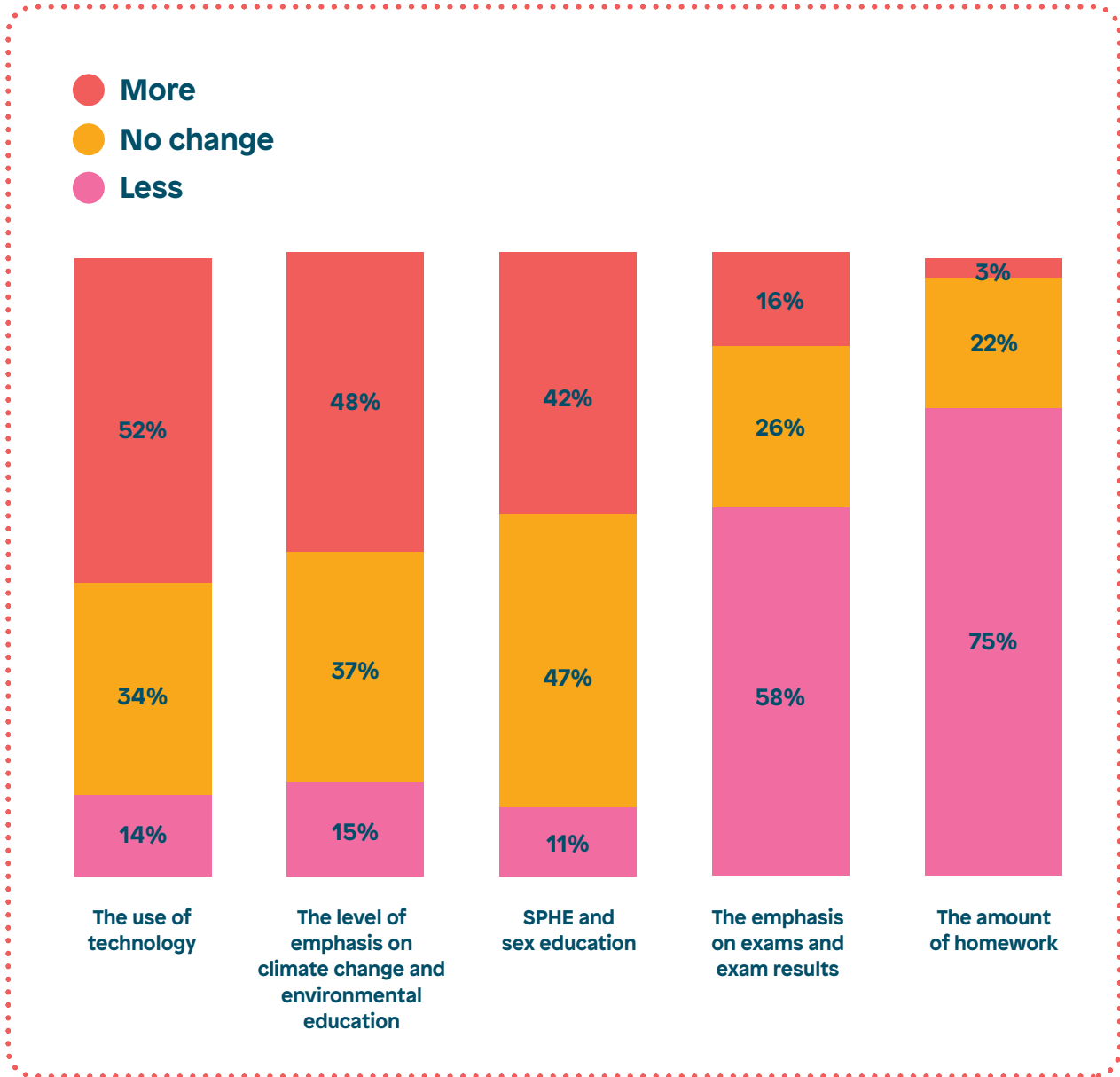
● No change

● Less



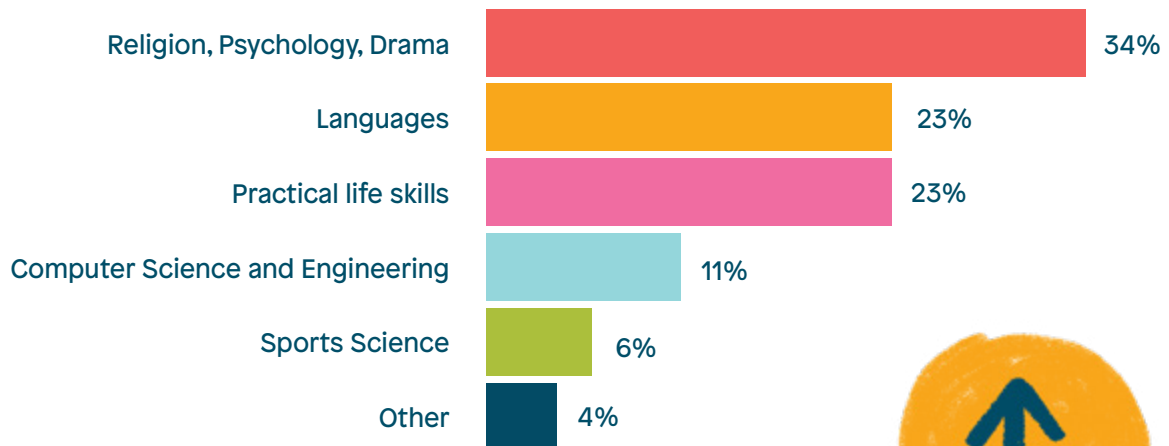
Q11 : Continued

...while also feeling there should be less emphasis on exams and exams results and the amount of homework given.



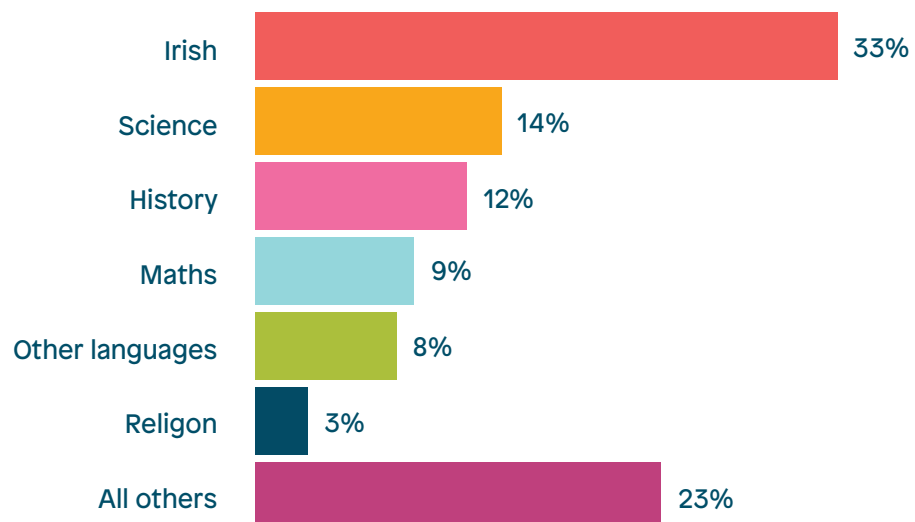
Q11a

You said you think there should be more subjects available in schools. What new subject would you like to see **added to the curriculum?**



Q11a

You said you think there should be less subjects available in schools. What subject would you like to see **removed from the curriculum?**



Note: Q11a and Q11b do not add up to 100% as they were multi response questions.

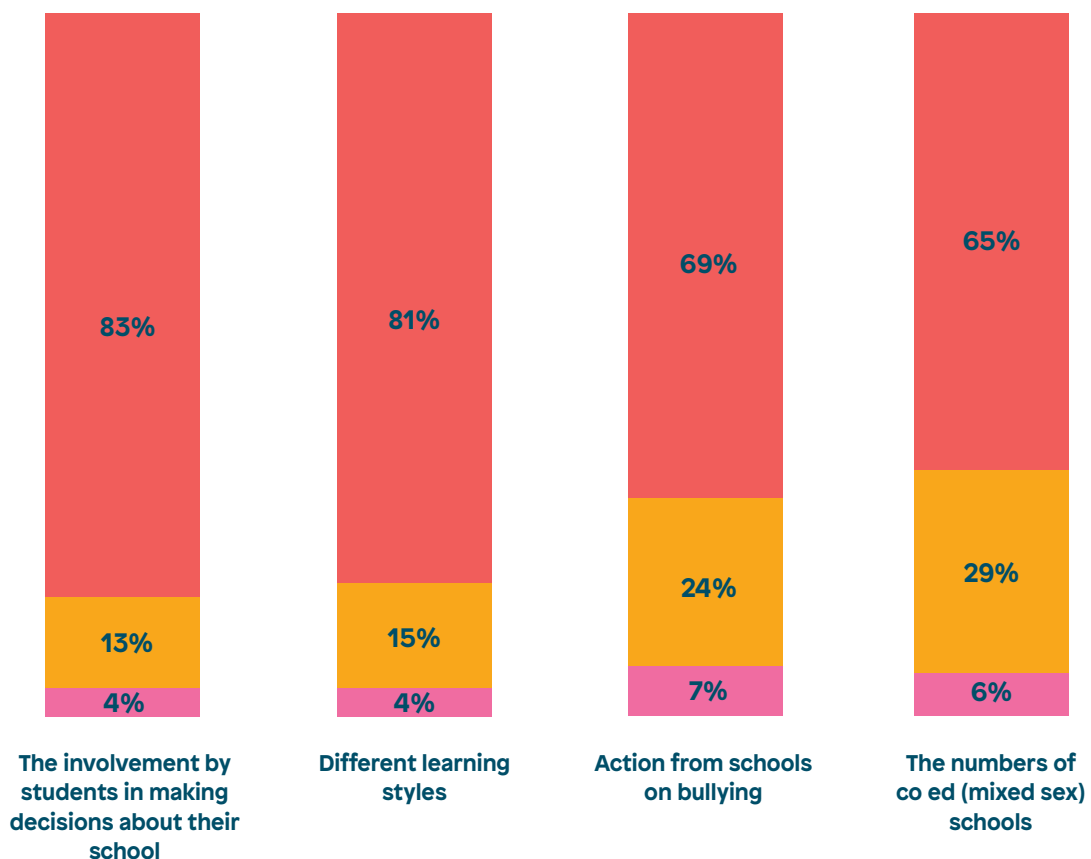
Q12 Looking to the future of our schools and education system, do you think we need more or less of the following:

When asked to think about the future of our schools and education system, over **80%** felt there should be more involvement by students in decision making and greater variation in learning styles. **69%** highlighted the need for more action from schools on bullying.

● More

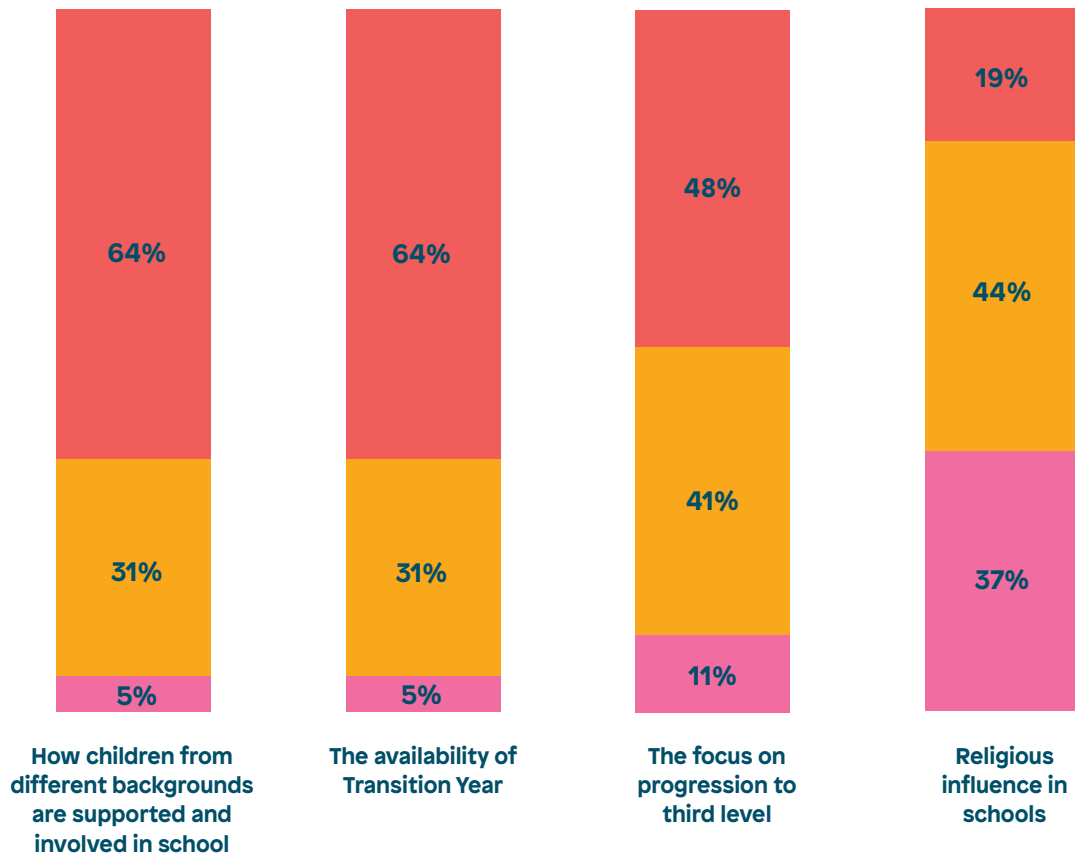
● No change

● Less

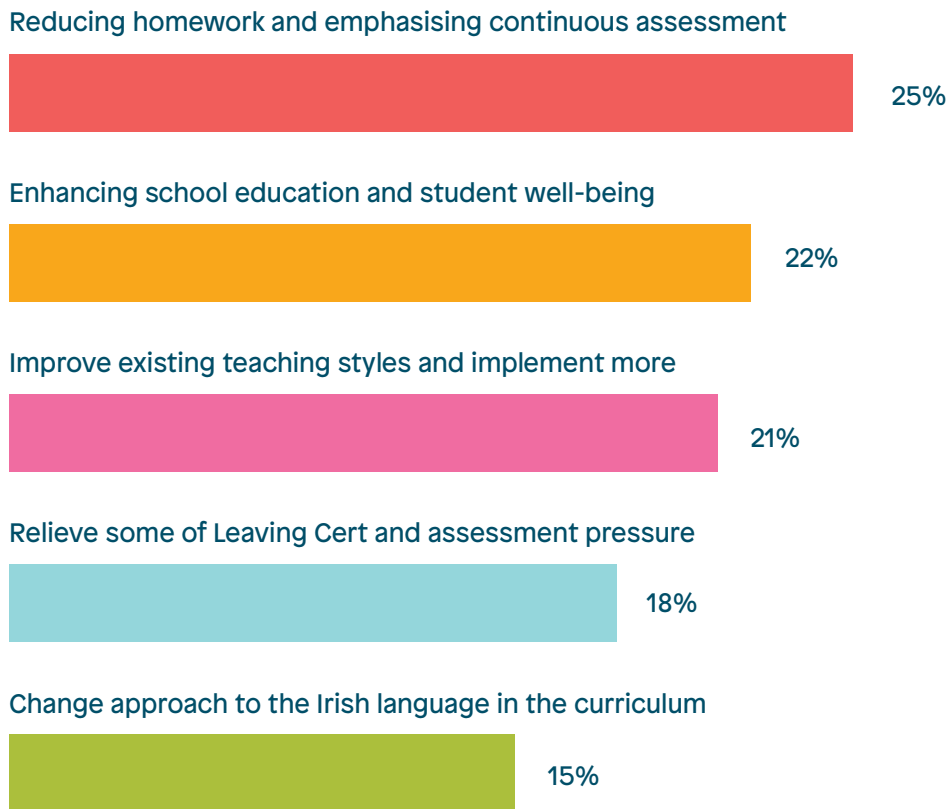


Q12 : Continued

- More
- No change
- Less



Q13 What change do you think should be made to the Irish education system or the curriculum to make it the best in the world?



Note: Q13 does not add up to 100% as it was a multi response question.

Béim a chuir ar fás
daoine ní fás acadúil

Change the
leaving cert

Change
points system

A foreign language
to be compulsory as well
as woodwork, business
etc. in Junior Cert

1hr mandatory
activity a day

being told more about what to do after school other than collage or options on what to do in life

continuous assessment not just one huge exam at the end. Interviews for college not having everything so numbers based.

Cuir béim ar measúnú leanúnach agus faigh reidh leis an ard teist

A lot more focus on children's mental health and have more ways children can communicate issues they have with their school i.e issues with staff without feeling judged and having their voice heard

Fócas níos mó ar ghníomhaíochtaí cruthaitheacha

Better teaching methods

A review of how classroom based assessments are done as they can add additional stress for students on top of all other activities/ subjects that give someone a rounded education making school unnecessarily demanding and taking away from downtime for students

Abolish the leaving cert and take on a whole new leaving cert similar to a-levels in Northern Ireland it would reduce stress, pressure and improve our mental health

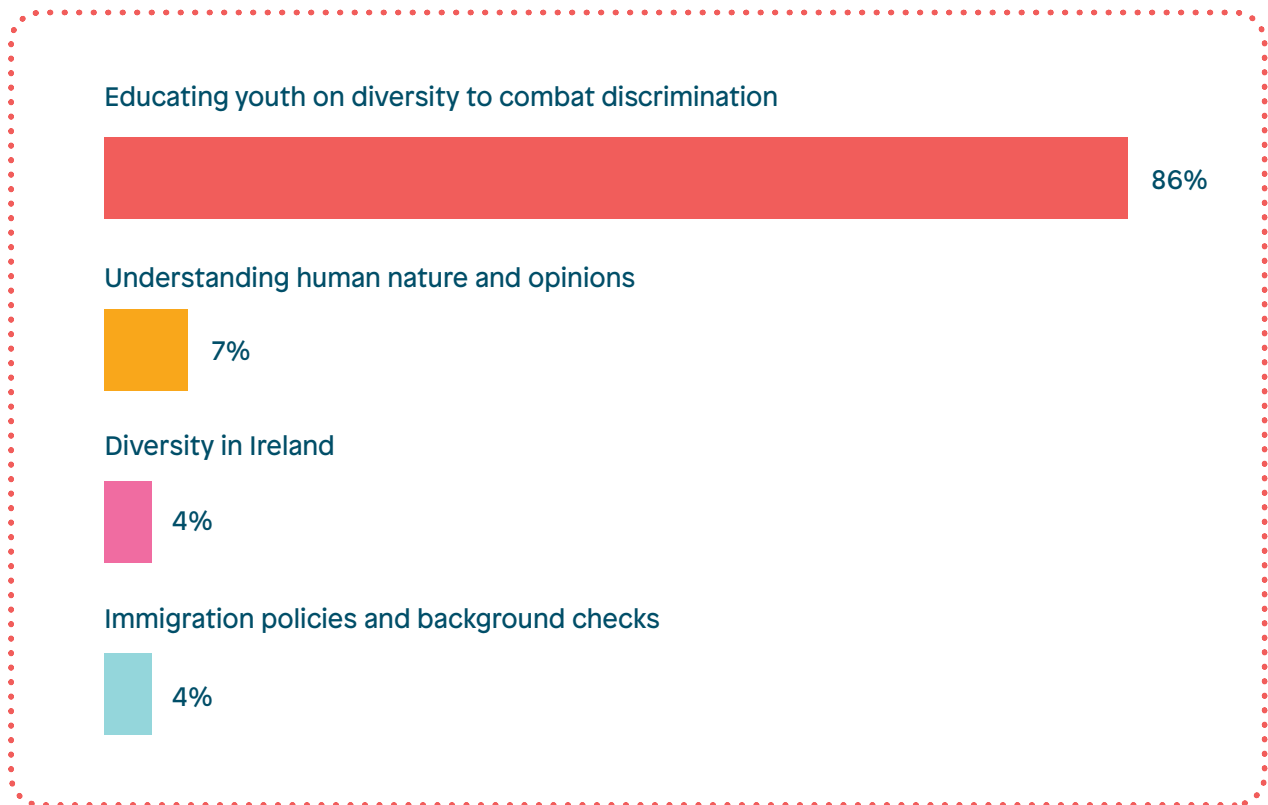
Abolish homework Make Irish a choice subject. Reduce focus on leaving cert final exams. Increase spending and resources for school. Increase focus on technology. Remove school wide ban on use of mobile phones

Different learning styles to help everyone learn in an enjoyable way and more notice of gifted children

Go mbeadh na leabhar ar fad ar fáil trí Ghaeilge.

Q14 : What do you think needs to happen to stop discrimination in Ireland?

Educating young people on diversity (**86%**) is by far the highest ranked solution to combatting discrimination in Ireland.



Note: Q14 does not add up to 100% as it was a multi response question.

Níos mó eolas a chuir faoi cúlraí difriúla ar fáil i scoileanna.

Gardaí need to be stricter and arrest people who are discriminating

Fixing the housing crisis and economy. So that people stop blaming foreign nationals for "taking the jobs"

Educate people on diversity in Ireland and how to respect others. especially younger children and teens because what you learn as a young person will often stick for life.

better education

Be more strict on what happens to the person that discriminates other people

Ba ceart go mbeidh níos mó oideachas faoi cultúir éagsúla

“ **Better the inclusivity or take action against hateful people.** ”

A larger focus in history classes on figures such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Stonewall, etc.. I believe learning more history may help people learn to treat others with more respect

“ **I don't think it has to do with school but more at home** ”

both children and teachers can be misinformed or uninformed on topics such as gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, nationality, culture and race. A better education on these traits would lead to more understanding and less ignorance. Access to a safe space to talk freely should be provided for those discriminated against.

Disciplinary action against those that take part in it.

Aoichainteoirí ó cultúrtha difriúla ag cainnt os comhair sluaite móra

Teach children from a very young age to respect everyone's different cultures and backgrounds. In Australia, they held a Harmony Day where all cultures were celebrated at school and everyone wore yellow!

Ná bí racist nó homofobac

different groups/cultures need to mix together in different social/sport/community events

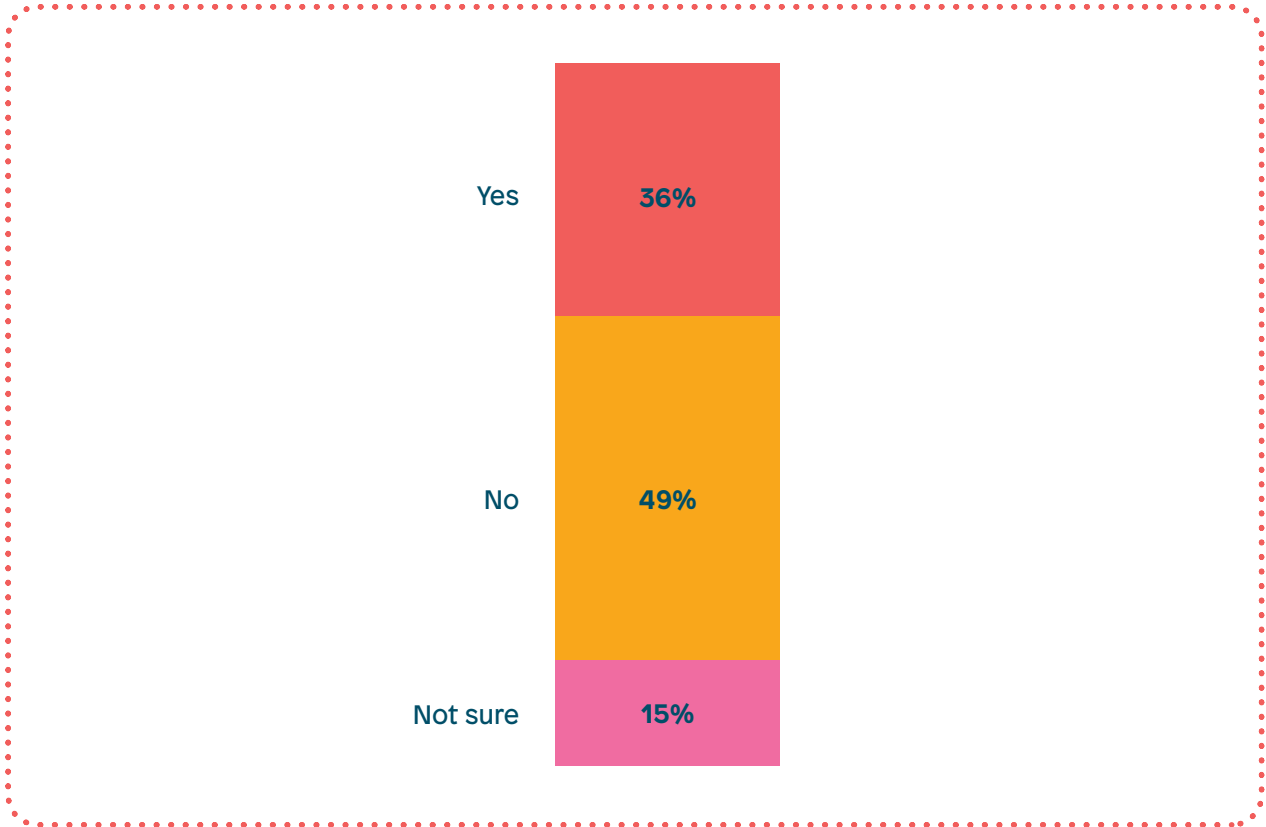
children need to be educated about it

Ba chóir go mbeadh scoileanna measctha, chun go mbeadh cailíní agus buachaillí ina dtaithe ar a chéile sa fíor saoil.

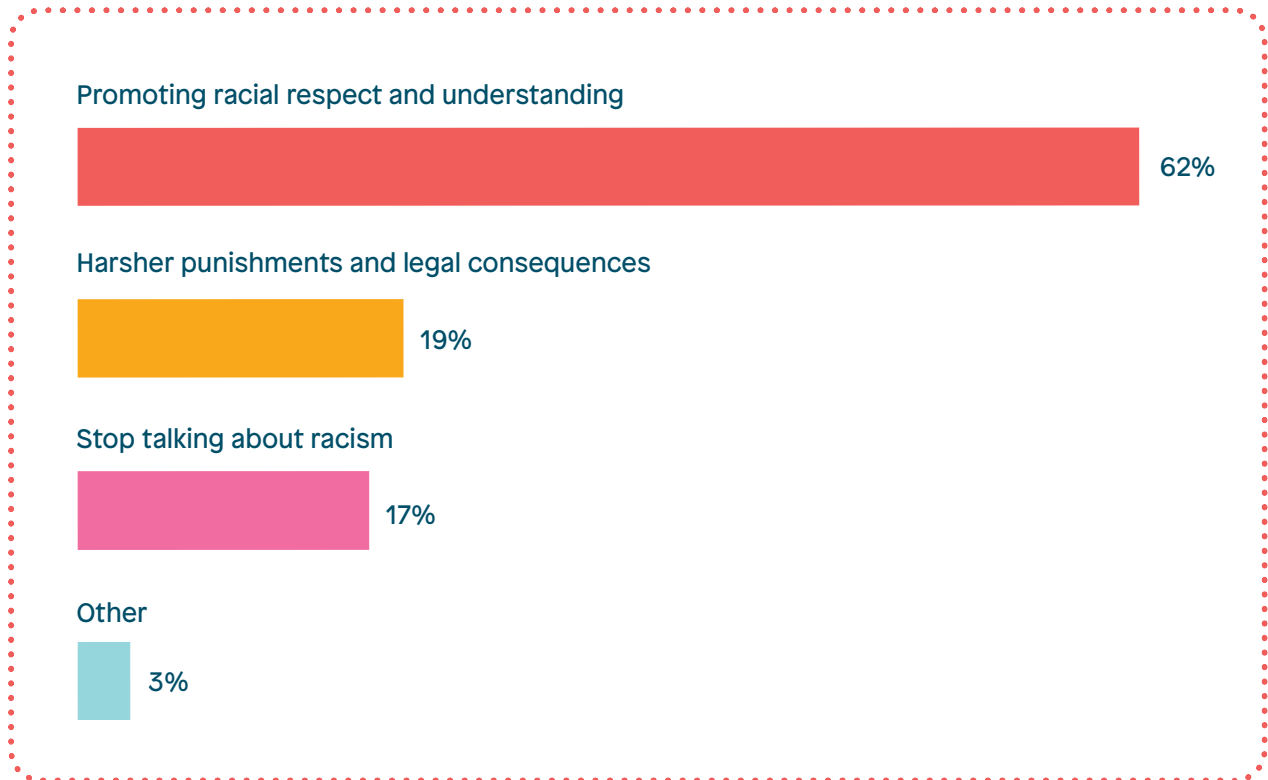
Educate people that even if it is meant as a joke that does not mean it will be taken as one

Q15 : Have you experienced discrimination?

36% of students say they've experienced discrimination.



Q16 What do you think needs to happen to stop racism in Ireland?



Note: Q16 does not add up to 100% as it was a multi response question.



Punish na racist daoine

Befriend, be kind and accept people for who that are and not the colour of there skin

Be taught in school how important it is to treat everyone the same

Tackle it more seriously

Better education around different cultures and diversity in school

I think people need to realize that they are human at the end of the day and that everyone should be treated the same no matter what!

Education for young people and consequences for discrimination.

Learn about ethnic backgrounds and cultures

More consequences to someone who's racist

Have people learn about what its like to live in a whole different country when you have coloured skin

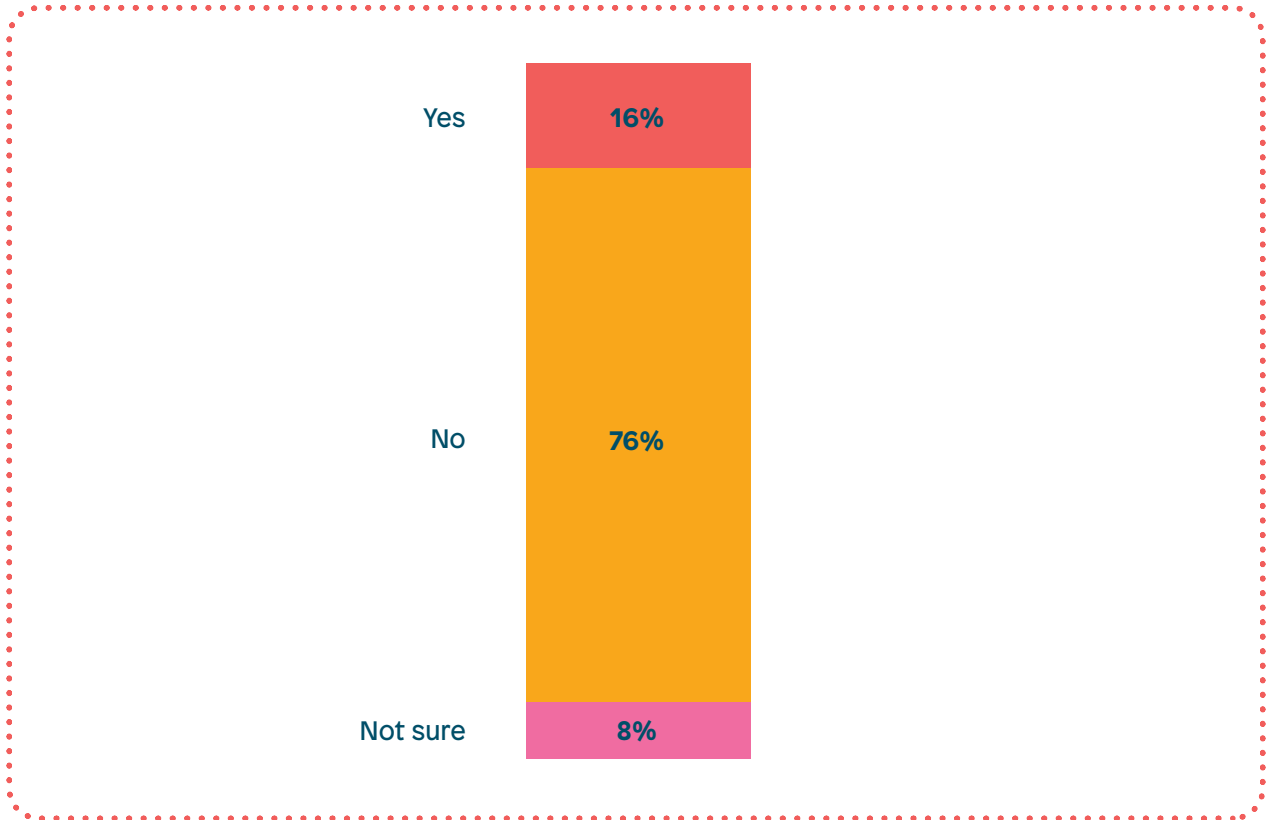
Níos mó oideachas a thabhairt ar cúltúir éagsúla ní amháin éirineach nó an domhan thiar.

when it comes to the topics of race and immigration there's a lack of understanding regarding specific ethnic groups and the sort of obstacles they face in society. people have misconceptions saying "they're only here to take our dole" and things like that. with proper education set in schools mandatory to attend or not that teaches about the cultures and religions of these people from different backgrounds and an in depth lesson about it would be beneficial to everyone involved.

People need first hand experience of one another

Q17 : Have you experienced racism?

17% of students report having experienced racism.



Q18 : What needs to happen to stop bullying?

More teacher involvement in preventing bullying



Addressing bullying with adult intervention



Harsher punishments



Promoting kindness and awareness among people



Oideachas a theann ar
theamh sláinte meabhrach
nuair atá bullíocht ar suil

A focus placed on
respecting one another
as equals rather than
respecting people as more
important "authority
figures"

more action
by teachers

Educate children in
schools about the
effects of bullying

Get rid of bully's
from schools

Níos mó piónóis

there needs
to be more support
available

less technology for
younger generations

A lot less social
media platforms

Níos mó
oideachas do
páistí ar scoil
faoi bulaíocht

**Bigger
consequences**

Need to make
it easier to report it

Education against bullying that shows the realities and the consequences of such actions, this all stems from youth and I believe that parents should be held more accountable on how their children are raised.

**More action
from schools**

Níos mó gníomh ó scoileanna ar
thaobh bulaíocht agus piónós
níos déine ar idirdhealú

Very few people are emotionally intelligent. If there are ways to teach people to have empathy especially at a younger age it will have a big difference.

**schools need to step
up and engage when
an issue is brought
to them**

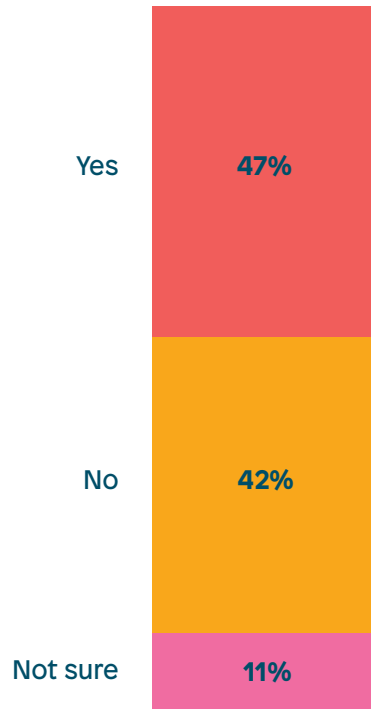
**Bullies are created by being
bullied themselves.**

It needs to stop being
so easy, most bully's
don't realise when
they cross the line
of jokes and bullying

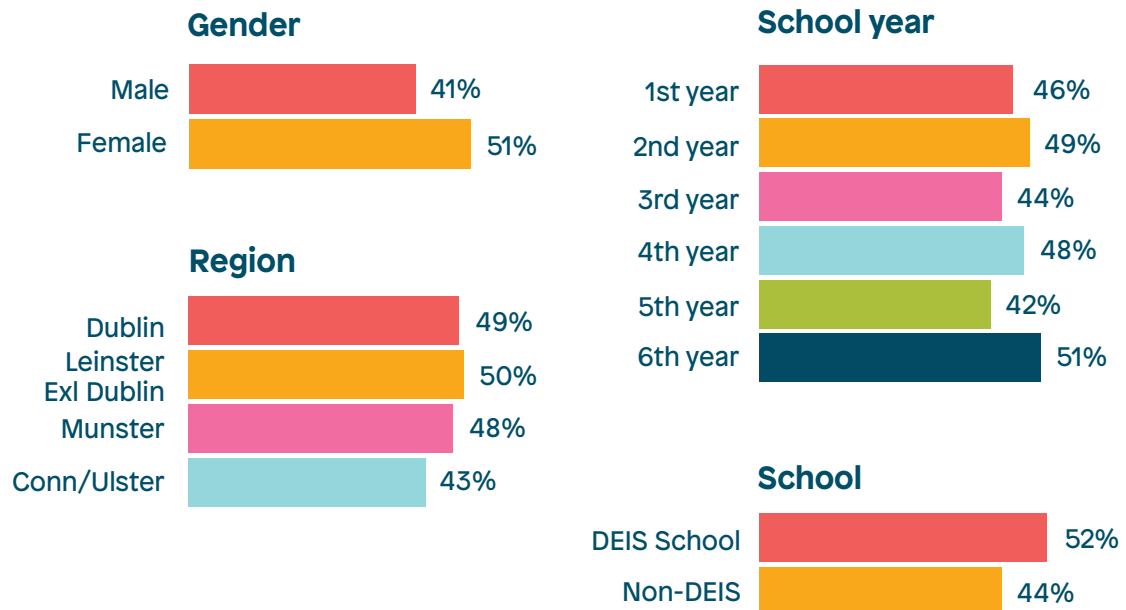
People need to look
out for the signs better
as not everyone is
brave enough to tell a
trusted adult.

Q19 : Have you experienced bullying?

47% of children report having experienced bullying.

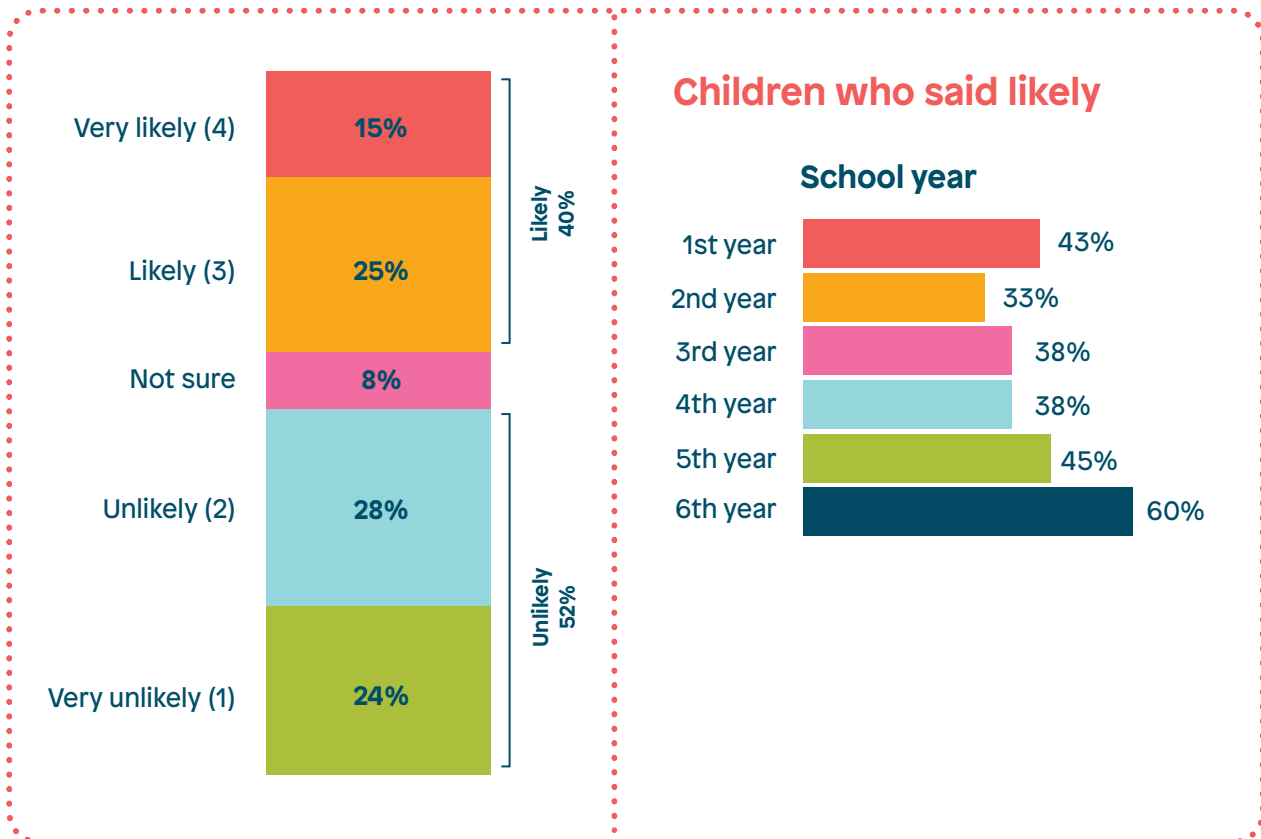


Children who said yes



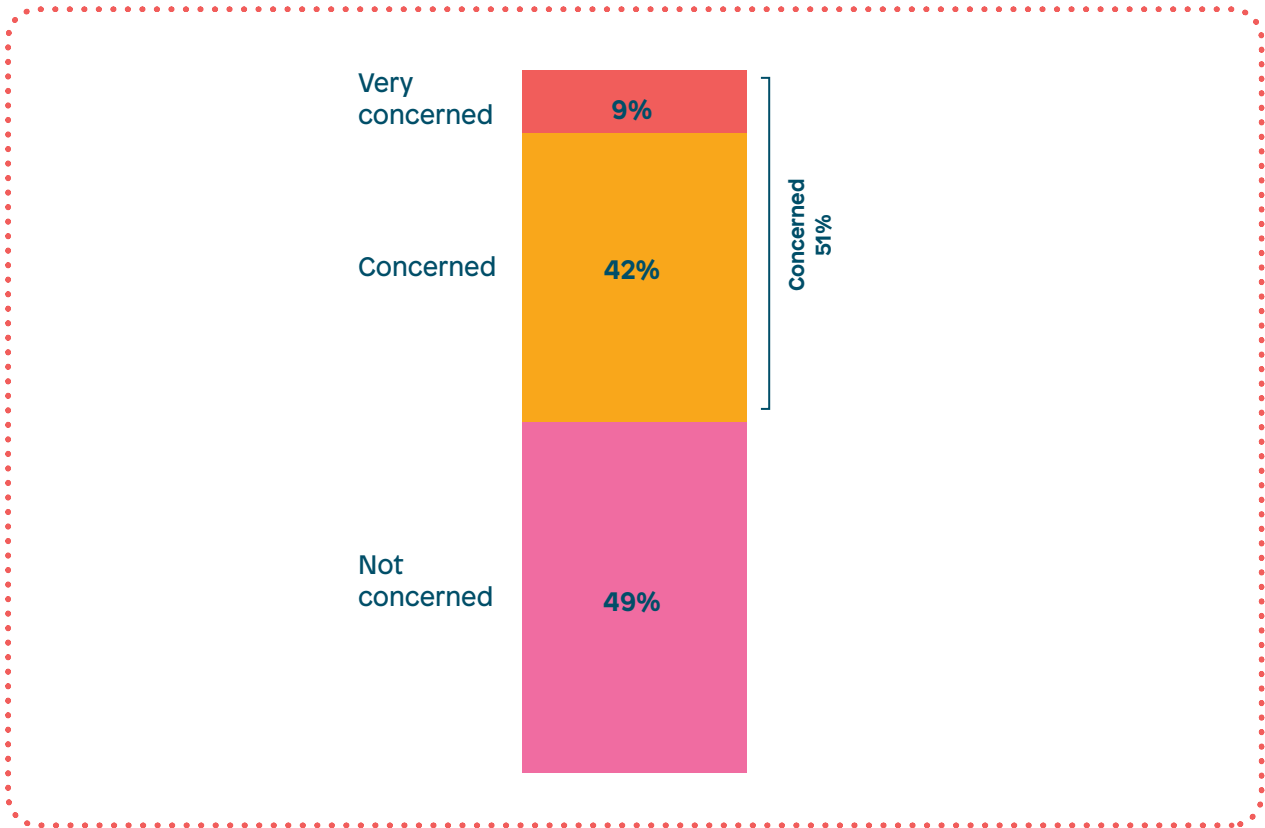
Q20 If you were having problems with your mental health and you had access to a therapist at your school, how likely would you be to use them?

40% of students would make use of a therapist at their school if they had access to them. **52%** say they are unlikely to.



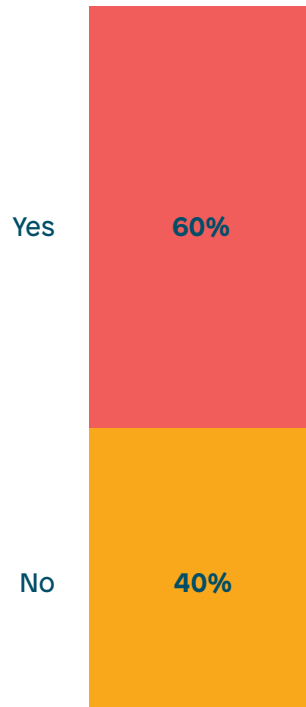
Q21 : Are you concerned about online safety?

51% report being concerned about online safety.

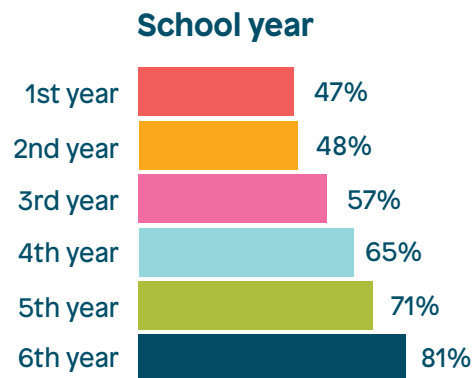
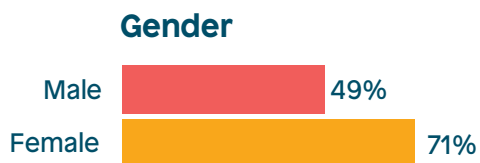


Q22 Do you share moments from your life on social media?

60% report sharing moments from their life on social media.

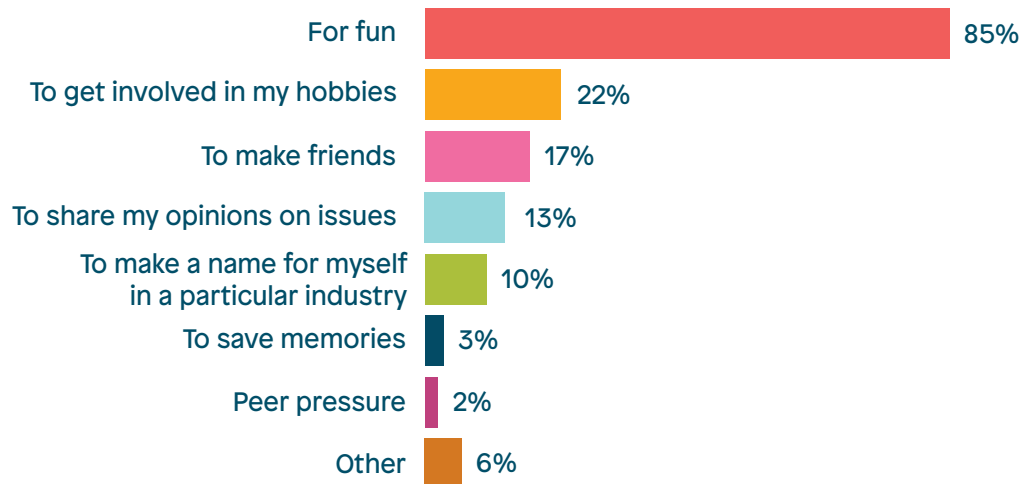


Children who said yes



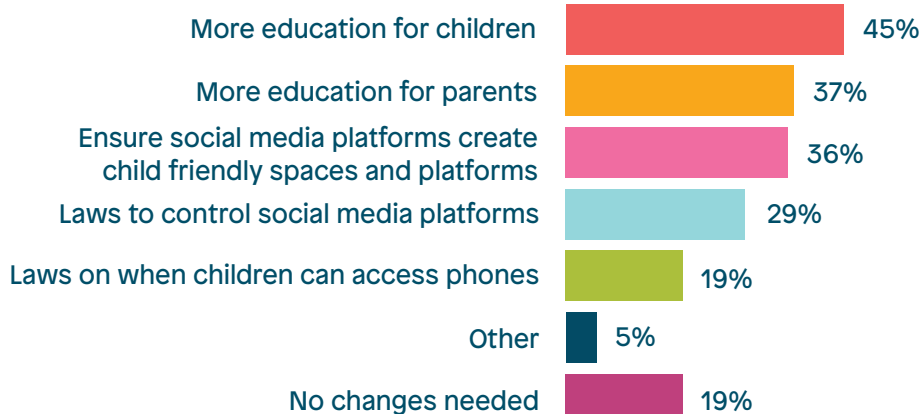
Q22a Why do you share moments from your life on social media?

85% of students say they share moments on social media for fun.



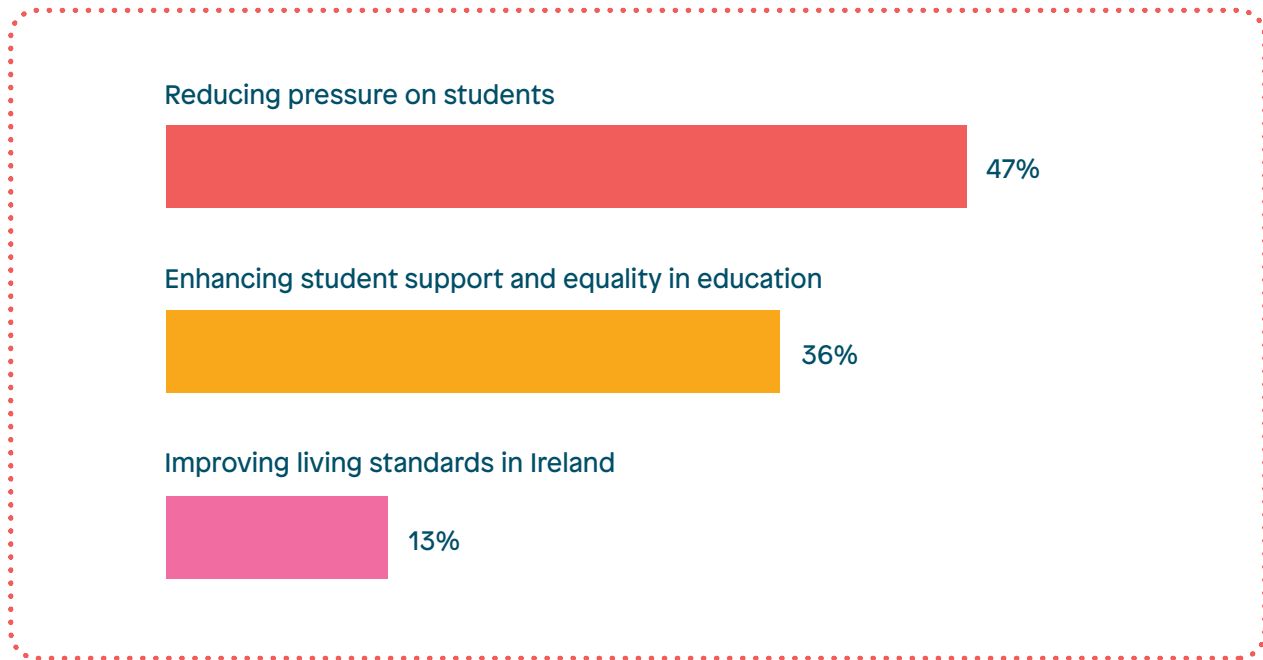
Q23 What needs to happen to ensure children are safe online?

More education for children (45%) is the top suggestion for ensuring child safety online, followed by education for parents (37%), and ensuring social media platforms create child friendly spaces (36%).



Q24 : What should our priority be for the next 5 years?

When asked what the OCO's priority should be over the next 5 years, reducing pressure on students (**47%**) ranks top, followed by enhancing student support (**36%**).



Costas Marachtála in Éirinn

Children should have
safe place to go to school
with no bullies

Le bheith ag faire
amach do pháistí óga ar na
meáin shóisialta, cúnamh
airgeadais do cheannaitheoirí
óga tí, tosaíocht tugtha
don chóras cúram
sláinte

Teenagers having
the chance to have
their voices heard
over problems

leas mhuintir
na tíre seo

Focus on climate
change and speak
more about it in
school and actually
take action

Help people
with mental issues and
that are struggling

ban on phones
for primary
school students

Teaching kids what to do after school as an adult

A focus on important pieces of adult life such as job interviews and workplace etiquette and a focus on improving the education system as a whole

Coiméad do inchinn oscailte agus éist leis na daltaí atá ag freastail ar scoil ag an nóiméad seo

A new leaving cert

focus on improving education and making it less stressful

A focus on important pieces of adult life such as job interviews and workplace etiquette and a focus on improving the education system as a whole

Allowing everyone to go to college even if they don't qualify for a grant or have the money to pay for fees.

Create more mixed sex schools

Bullying and mental health as they go together

Children's future in this country as there is a very evident housing problem and job opportunities are declining.

"banning homework"

Go bhfuil gach páiste sásta

Better housing and health services

Create affordable housing and affordable accommodation for uni students so Ireland can progress because by doing this more people will go to uni as currently lots of people are dropping out because they can't afford it create separate housing for Ukrainians or people coming in and separate for nationals also have better view of foreigners entering the country in the media in the news

Decrease homework to reduce stress levels on students who need to study and watch our more for mental health problems that students could be suffering from

Ensure children are growing up in a safe environment, maybe providing services to parents on how to parent children better

Provide better housing for students who can't afford third level education

Improve mental health services

Ensuring children in state care are treated respectfully and given the same opportunities as other children, promote equality and diversity in schools and reconsider the format of classroom based assessments

Keeping young children safe from the internet and creating more common-place but private places for older students to get help with their mental health. (walking into a specific teacher or room or being seen talking to that same teacher a lot is a clear sign of what you are doing and will drastically lower the amount of people open to the idea of looking for that help.



Ombudsman for Children's Office
Millennium House
52-56 Great Strand Street
Dublin 1
D01 F5P8

T: 01 865 6800
F: 01 874 7333
E: oco@oco.ie
www.oco.ie
🐦 @OCO_ireland



ombudsman
do leanaí
for children