

October 2023

Natural Women's Council, Irish Education Alliance, Parents' Rights Alliance and Lawyers for Justice.

RE: Belong To "Quality" Mark Programme & Belong To Weeklong November "Stand Up" in school campaigns.

Dear Principal, Staff and Board of Management,

We, the Natural Women's Council, the Irish Education Alliance, the Parents' Rights Alliance and Lawyers for Justice refer to the letter issued by Belong To on or about the 27th April 2023 seeking applications from secondary schools in Ireland to apply for its Quality Mark Initiative 2023 – 2024. We further note the Belong To weeklong campaign "Stand Up" (6 - 10 November this year) will run in various secondary schools throughout Ireland. We would like to express our serious concerns over the participation of schools in these two campaigns.

It is, of course, very important that ALL students, including those from minority groups, are supported and should feel safe in the school environment and bullying of any kind should never be tolerated. However, it is also important that all students should be treated equally. To elevate the status of one particular minority group over and above any other, leads to favourable treatment and inequality. We believe this is the effect a quality mark such as the one proposed by Belong To and Stand Up week would have.

We have serious reservations about the motivations and influences of Belong To, who are not a homegrown grassroots organisation, as they would have us believe. They are a large corporate NGO with significant funds available to them. Belong To receive a large amount of government funding as well as funding from a long list of large corporations. Belong To's own end of year report for 2022 shows that they received €811,285 of tax payers' money and had €1.3 million at the end of the year¹. They are a powerful activist lobby group who have considerable influence over government departments, politicians, teaching bodies and unions, schools and youth organisations.

Their motivation seems to be to ensure that transgender ideology pervades our education system and the lives of children in this country and is taught to children as fact. This is ideology that is not science-based and is not accepted by most parents of children in Irish schools and has the potential to cause confusion and harm to vulnerable teenagers. NGOs such as Belong To and TENI (Transgender Equality Network Ireland) seem to have a strong foothold in the curriculum in Irish schools, with considerable influence over the department of education, the NCCA and teaching unions and open access to schools, teachers and students.

According to Belong To's website, its services are for "young people" aged from 14 years old to 23. Presumably, the minimum age was set at 14, taking an informed view that the services are not appropriate for children under 14. Despite their own self-imposed age minimum of 14, Belong To has for years sought access to Irish children aged 12 and 13 attending secondary schools with its programmes, services and content and has been granted same. Why has no school which has invited Belong To in ever questioned this obvious discrepancy?

Belong To "Quality" Mark Programme

¹ <https://www.belongto.org/funding-governance/annual-reports/belong-to-annual-report-2022/>

The Belong To quality mark programme requires a school to work for an entire 18 months to obtain a quality mark. This is an extraordinarily long period of time. A perusal of the website suggests that teachers, staff and students would be required to divert precious time, effort and focus to chasing this mark. This would be time away from core studies. Accreditation requires a “whole school approach”. So no part of the school would be left untouched by this accreditation process. Access to the whole school by Belong To would be a necessary part of the 18-month programme. Would all parents be notified and their prior consent obtained? We would argue that it is entirely inappropriate for an outside activist group with a specific agenda and no expertise in education, to judge the quality of a secondary school.

In addition, this accreditation process incurs a cost to each school of €845, at a time when schools are struggling to keep the lights and heat on. As stated, Belong To is an extremely well-funded NGO. It would appear that the finances of Belong To are much healthier than those of our Irish schools, and as such it is shocking that schools are charged an exorbitant fee to participate in this accreditation process. Chasing a “quality mark” with an 18-month commitment will only serve to further misdirect precious time, resources, finances and attention away from the education of our children so that they may go into the world as productive, literate educated adults.

Weeklong Belong To Campaign In Our Irish Secondary Schools this November

There are schools in Ireland devoting an entire week in November to Belong To messaging. Students should be taught that every student is cherished and must be respected; that bullying for any reason, will not be tolerated. Devoting an entire week to one very small group tells the students that in fact we are not all the same, some people are to get extra attention, love and respect. Very worryingly, this sets the scene for social contagion. Gender dysphoria, which once affected an exceedingly small percentage of children has in very recent years skyrocketed in numbers. If young children, especially those just fresh from primary school, aged 12 and 13, are suddenly learning over an entire week that one particular group is to get special attention, this will lead to not equal status for that group but a celebrated and elevated status. First years only have a month in their new secondary school before they are hit with an intensive weeklong Belong To campaign which could be seen as a recruitment week.

Who Is Belong To?

Belong To Youth Service has appointed itself “the national organisation supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI+) young people in Ireland” according to its website. They claim to work with children and young people aged between 14 and 23. This is a legally and morally troubling age group to target on matters of a sexual nature, as it encompasses both minor children and adults.

Belong To’s website provides contact details for adult sexual information services for their 14- to 23-year-old target audience, Gay Health Network (“publishes and distributes HIV and safer sex information for men who have sex with men (MSM) ...”) and Man2Man (“a comprehensive sexual health information for men who have sex with men”). Why are minor children aged 14 to 17 being directed to adult sexual information services? Do our gay children not require shielding from adult sexual content in the same manner that our heterosexual children do? An organisation that focusses on sexual issues and claims to represent both minor children below the age of consent and adults is in truly murky waters. Are minor children separated in Belong To “youth” groups, to ensure that they are not being asked to discuss sexual matters in front of adults and are not exposed to those adults talking about the same? Does Belong To consider it safe for a 23-year-old man to be in a youth group discussing sexual matters with a 14-year-old boy or girl?

We refer to a testimony from a young person who attended Belong To youth groups which states that most of the teenagers attending the groups start off identifying as gay, but by the 3rd or 4th meeting, the majority of those teenagers begin to identify as transgender. This testimony makes shocking reading and illuminates Belong To as an organisation who, rather than supporting gay teenagers to be comfortable with who they are, convinces them that they should change their gender. This could be seen as a form of conversion therapy. In a tweet posting this testimony, Irish Senator G. Craughwell stated that he will be contacting the police and that he wants a full investigation into Belong To². Also included is a link to an interview with a young Lesbian who describes her own disturbing experiences at a Belong To youth group³. This begs the question, is Belong To really supporting gay, lesbian and bisexual youth at all? Or is this group simply a front for a transgender organisation, drawing in young and vulnerable gay teenagers and young people and converting them to be transgender?

Belong To as Teacher Trainers?

Belong To engage in “teacher training” in Ireland. Here is an excerpt from a training manual⁴, whereby they shockingly advise teachers and youth workers to lie to parents about children who have disclosed that they are transgender:

Do

Respect their judgement and preferences in relation to their family. Don't assume someone is out – it may not be safe for them to be out in certain circumstances.

Respect their confidentiality. Being trans is not a child protection issue in and of itself, only if there is an additional threat of harm present, in line with the national guidelines.

Don't

Out them to their parents. Ensure you use whatever pronouns they wish you to use if you are communicating with their parents about or with the young person.

Out them if their parent or guardian asks directly – say you don't know, reassure the parent that the most important thing is the young person's happiness and feeling of safe spaces. Encourage them to speak to their young person.

It is immoral and unethical to lie to parents about their children. Their child is not “their young person” but minor child for whom parents are the primary carers and educators under the law. Gender Dysphoria is a medical condition and not one that legally may be kept hidden from a child's parent. To suggest that a child could be unsafe or at risk of “harm” from their family if their parents and legal guardians, are advised of their condition is very divisive. If any child is at actual risk of harm, then this is a separate child protection issue and should be reported to Tusla, as all teachers, who have child protection training, will know. However, this insinuation appears to be a sinister attempt by Belong To to justify transitioning vulnerable and confused children behind their parents' backs and without proper medical advice. If schools, teachers and principals go along with this secrecy, they will be complicit. A trusting relationship between parents and teachers in schools is very important. An organisation that trains teachers to lie to parents should not be allowed near schools nor children. No school should seek the approval of such an organisation.

Belong To Does Not Have Medical Licence to Dispense Medical Advice.

² https://twitter.com/gcraughwell/status/1702746240578916433?s=48&t=YCL0YmFgN0UeIYO9zaE0_w

³ <https://westawake.substack.com/p/a-24-year-old-woman-speaks-out-about?sd=pf>

⁴ <https://gript.ie/a-state-funded-ngo-has-been-training-teachers-to-lie-to-parents-about-their-children/>

Belong To appears to dispense medical and psychological advice to children and to schools, without a medical licence to do so. Gender Dysphoria is not a sexual orientation but a recognised psychological condition. Demand for total and unwavering affirmation of this condition is an ideology and not one supported by many in the medical field. We do not affirm anorexia, a psychological condition where an individual who is of normal or low body weight believes they are overweight. We do not treat anorexia in secondary schools by devoting a week to the condition and insisting that all students and teachers affirm the child's belief that they are fat. We recognise this would be cruel and not helpful to the child suffering this condition. Wisely, schools leave this serious condition to medical experts, doctors and psychiatrists. Do children suffering from gender dysphoria not deserve the same level of respectful and professional treatment?

Failure to respect gender dysphoria as a psychological condition is dangerous. However, Belong To appears to be motivated to turn Irish children into lifelong transgender medical patients, with serious medical consequences, including irreversible hormone therapy which can have serious side effects, horrific genital mutilation, mastectomy and sterilisation. On the issue of transgenderism, schools must remain neutral and insist that proper licensed clinical advice is sought for each individual child suffering from gender dysphoria, not the general advice of an advocacy group pushing a particular radical agenda with a one size fits all prescription for Irish children. Our youth deserve better than that.

Licensed And Experienced Clinicians Speaking Out Against Radical Activist Led Organisations

On the 24th of September 2023, Donal O'Shea, the HSE clinical lead for obesity who also works as an endocrinologist with the National Gender Service, has come out against the establishment of a "activist-led" transgender service and calls it dangerous⁵. Activist groups such as Belong To and TENI have a particular ideological agenda, but without a particular medical and psychological background and expertise. Following an investigation into the notorious Tavistock clinic by Dr Hilary Cass⁶, the NHS have recommended a move away from medicalised 'gender affirmative health care' such as puberty blockers, hormone therapy and surgery, in favour of a more holistic psychological approach for children with gender dysphoria. Many other European countries, have made similar moves, recognising the harm that can be done to children who are rushed into medical treatment programs. Despite this, activist lobby groups such as Belong To and TENI are pushing for 'gender affirmative health care' to be widely available to children in Ireland against the advice of expert clinicians such as Dr O'Shea. They are not licensed and trained healthcare professionals, but they want to influence government policy, train teachers and manipulate schools to jump through hoops to obtain their "quality mark".

It is worth noting that the above referenced HSE National Gender Service published details last year that up to 90% of people attending the NGS are autistic. They also confirmed that many of those attending the services suffer from depression, low mood or anxiety. These are individuals with complex psychological needs. They are the last children who should be targeted by activist groups in order to further their agenda. They are the last children whose parents should be kept in the dark about their child's state of mind.

Social Contagion

⁵ <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/leading-clinician-warns-of-hse-gender-care-dangers/a1246391788.html>

⁶ <https://cass.independent-review.uk/publications/interim-report/>

Social contagion was referred to by the Cass report as an important factor in the massively increased numbers of children who were referred to the Tavistock clinic with gender dysphoria in recent years. The constant promotion of transgender ideology in schools will only compound this social contagion as more children will start to question their gender and being transgender becomes increasingly fashionable, with transgender students receiving special treatment and kudos.

While gender dysphoria is a recognised condition, many teenagers suffer from lack of confidence and poor self-image. Surely, we should be supporting them to be happy in themselves and to feel comfortable in the bodies they were born in, before suggesting that something as drastic as changing their gender will solve all their problems. The Cass report states categorically that social transition, including changing names and pro-nouns, is not a neutral act but a form of intervention which should not be undertaken lightly and only ever under the supervision of a clinical expert. Activist groups and teachers are not clinical experts.

Suicide Rate Increases Post Surgery

The lie that has kept groups like Belong To and gender affirmative health care clinics in business is that if confused and vulnerable children aren't allowed to take irreversible and damaging cross sex hormones and puberty blockers and then allowed to surgically mutilate and sterilise their perfect young bodies, they are more likely to kill themselves. Despite the fact that this lie has been shown to be based on one piece of unreliable research⁷, terrified parents are still routinely asked, "would you prefer a dead daughter or a live son". In fact, transgender people who have transitioned have been shown in a long-term follow-up Swedish study to have a 19 x higher rate of suicide than matched controls⁸.

Studies have also shown that the majority of children young people will, in fact, grow out of gender dysphoria⁹. Very concerning is the increasing number of young people, often referred to as 'detransitioners', who regret medically transitioning and seek to reverse these procedures. More of these brave young people are now speaking out about how they were rushed into making these permanent life changing decisions at a very young age when they were not able to fully understand the consequences. Their stories are very distressing. Of course, breasts cannot be grown back, and some of the effects of hormone therapy are also permanent. They are also speaking out about some of the horrible side effects that they suffered as a result of medical procedures and therapy¹⁰. Ironically, these young people are often shunned and vilified by the transgender community who were so supportive of them through the process of transitioning. Belong To offers no support for these individuals.

Conclusion

Pending a full investigation into all the above matters, we request that Belong To should not be granted access to schools and students. We request that all schools cease any involvement with Belong To and they do not participate in Stand Up Week or seek the Belong To 'Quality Mark'.

We would also like to remind schools that in accordance with section 9 (d) of the Education Act 1998, a school is obliged to:

⁷ <https://www.transgendertrend.com/the-suicide-myth/>

⁸ <https://www.transgendertrend.com/the-suicide-myth/>

⁹ <https://nypost.com/2022/06/18/detransitioned-teens-explain-why-they-regret-changing-genders/>

¹⁰ <https://genspect.org/category/detrans/>

*(d) 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, (emphasis added)*

Any outside body such as Belong To who will have influence over the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students in a school should therefore only ever be engaged following full consultation with parents, who in this instance should be party to all of the information included in the above letter.