

**St. Angela's College Home Economics Departments' response to the Green Paper 2006 "Promoting diet and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic disease".**

The Home Economics Department of St. Angela's College welcomes the opportunity to respond to the issues raised in the Green Paper 2006. We recognise that a multi-faceted approach to tackling the problem of obesity is required. Preventing overweight and obesity implies an integrated approach to fostering and sustaining a positive approach to health and lifestyle throughout an individuals' lifespan. This approach requires an holistic, supportive framework from the various Government Agencies; Education, Health, Enterprise, Industry and research together with the provision of the necessary social and environmental infrastructures to support this development and sustain it into the future. However, we will present the argument for prioritising the study of Home Economics during Primary and Secondary education for all students as one of the most effective Health Promotion Strategies available in combating poor dietary choices and practices.

Home Economics is an inter-disciplinary subject which concerns itself with the empowerment of individuals and families for the betterment of family and community life. The centrality of family is the core to the mission of Home Economics. It is unique in being the only school subject which concerns itself with teaching and learning about human relationships and development, resource management, consumerism, diet, nutrition and health, culinary skills, clothing and shelter, food choices and the influences and trends in consumer behaviour. In the context of promoting diet and physical activity, students acquire a sound understanding of the relationship between diet and healthy lifestyles and develop skills in the effective and efficient management of resources. The uniqueness of the subject is the relationship of theory to the solution of practical daily issues confronting individuals and families.

There are immense changes in our society and one example is how young people perceive food. The increasing markets and funding for research in the area of functional foods are steadily changing people's perception of food choices and cooking and where food companies are developing the next generation of consumer foods. Are we moving to creating a nation where our daily nutritional requirements will be obtained from a bottle, small packet or pill? Social and technological advancements in Ireland have left young people void of traditional family values in particular, an understanding of, and an appreciation for, good wholesome home cooking, fresh garden produce, shopping and traditional family meals. Home Economics, with its focus on the individual and family is a powerful medium for empowering and enabling young people make informed choices regarding health and lifestyles. The Food Studies component deals specifically with the relationship between diet and health, preparing balanced meals, knowledge of energy intake and output, food choices and consumption which lower the risks associated with chronic diseases. A considerable amount of curriculum time is designated to the integration of consumer education into Food Studies. It is set in economic contexts with appropriate coverage of consumer spending, trends in food choices, consumer behaviours and marketing. The theory is related to practice through carefully structured practical

activities which are relevant, academically challenging and motivational and which encourage students to become critically aware and discerning in the evaluation of home made balanced meals / dishes and how they compare nutritionally and economically with their commercial equivalent. Although Home Economics can act as a powerful intervention in promoting positive attitudes to food and health among young people, to support this requires food regulations which harmonise the advertising on nutrition and health gain and the health claims on food products. Dietary communication that take account of adolescents' motivations for food choices based on taste may have greater effect on dietary behaviour than those targeted at knowledge and could be a valuable tool in changing dietary behaviour.

In Ireland, Home Economics is an optional subject in the National Curriculum. The benefits and relevance of this subject are well recognised and enjoyed by the students who study it. The key issue for policymakers is to make the subject mandatory for all students to Junior Certificate level (12 – 15 years old). In a recent survey undertaken nationally by the Association of Teachers of Home Economics (ATHE) in association with St Angela's College, 71% of Home Economists expressed the urgent requirement to make the subject mandatory for all students to Junior Certificate. Furthermore, if modules in Home Economics - Healthy Eating were introduced into initial Primary Teacher Education, this would provide an effective intervention to guiding all partners towards healthy eating and lifestyle behaviours. As important health and lifestyle choices are made during childhood and adolescents, it is essential that children and young people are guided towards healthy lifestyles at a young age. Schools are an important setting for health – promoting interventions and can contribute to the future protection of children's health by promoting positive attitudes to diet, health and lifestyles, as risk factors for obesity are known to begin in early childhood.

Is it a coincidence that in countries such as Iceland and Finland where nutrition and food skills are taught as core or compulsory modules in the curriculum of all schools, the health of these nations is far superior to standards in most other counties in the developed world? In Iceland, food skills and Home Economics are high status subjects in the National Curriculum from age six. Traditional cookery lessons and sound nutrition form the basis of Home Economics classes, with the emphasis on the preparation, serving and eating of family meals. In Finland, at the upper stage of education (aged 14 – 16), Home Economics must be taken for a minimum of 114 hours over the three years. In that country, the firm emphasis on the cooking skills aspect of Home Economics is well recognised and acknowledged by both teachers, students and parents alike as being of benefit to participants both during school and beyond.

Nutrition Intervention Programmes are often put in place to fill the gap left when Home Economics is removed from the curriculum. In the U.K., the decline of cooking skills among young people has been directly attributed to the decline of Home Economics as a subject within the National Curriculum there in 1992, a fact which is now widely lamented by Health Professionals in the U.K. More recently in the U.K. 2004, a significant groundswell of public concern has arisen about obesity, diet and food safety for both children and adults. Related concerns have been raised about the extent to which

students are not given adequate life-skills preparation in second-level curriculum provision in order to develop the skills, knowledge and consumer discernment needed to organise and prepare nutritious food for personal or family consumption and to recognise the origins and nutritional qualities of common foods. More recently, school inspections in the U.K. 2005, also revealed grounds for this concern. Also, the lack of coverage of practical cooking and knowledge of healthy eating is frequently and understandably criticised by Headteachers in the U.K. who see a failure to meet a fundamental social need in their schools when students are not taught sound nutrition and how to cook and eat sensibly.

Let Irish Education policymakers learn from the resulting impact in other countries where Home Economics is devalued and its true potential not fully recognised. We call on Brussels to support the request from Home Economics Professionals in Ireland to make Home Economics mandatory for all second – level students in the EU from aged 12 -16 years. The Home Economics Department in St. Angela's College are currently involved in a Pilot Primary School Initiative to assess the impact of a healthy eating and lifestyles programme on the eating habits and exercise patterns of Primary School Children. As the sole designated college for the provision of Home Economics in Ireland, we request the EU Commission to make research funding available to roll out this initiative on a national basis.

The Home Economics Department would welcome the opportunity to discuss further the issues raised in this document and to assist in whatever way possible with the formulation of programmes in collaboration with other agencies, such as in the delivery of programmes of training as required. As in Ireland the subject Home Economics is uniquely and powerfully poised to address diet, nutrition and health, lifestyle and societal factors which have contributed to the growing problem with obesity, especially among school going children.

This paper represents the views of its author on the subject. These views have not been adopted or in any way approved by the Commission and should not be relied upon as a statement of the Commission's or Health & Consumer Protection DG's views. The European Commission does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this paper, nor does it accept responsibility for any use made thereof.