

Anti-bullying case study: being open and honest

Framingham Earl, a mixed comprehensive for 11 to 16-year-olds, encourages staff and students to talk openly about bullying. Recently it has been working with students to tackle sexism and sexist bullying.

This case study highlights how the school:

- runs annual bullying surveys for students
- uses trained student mentors to gather intelligence and support bullied students
- meets weekly with trained student mentors to discuss bullying problems and what the school needs to do to tackle them
- records every bullying incident
- uses data to improve its policies, procedures and staff training on bullying

“A teacher did a piece of work to find out what the commonplace, everyday sexism was at the school,” says headteacher Nicola Furneaux. “What she found out was not nice. So the question is: what do we do about that?”

Nicola admits the issue took staff by surprise. “We think we have a high level of reporting. But there must be a lot of stuff happening that none of the young people have felt is unacceptable enough to report. Young women may feel that they just have to put up with it. The message we have to send is: ‘no you don’t.’”

Following an assembly about sexism linked to International Women’s Day, some girls set up a group to try and tackle the problem at the school. The group has quickly grown in size, and now includes several boys.

For Nicola, it also raises the question: “What else is there we don’t know about?”

Annual surveys

One way Framingham Earl gathers information about bullying is through its annual student questionnaire, which students can complete anonymously.

“We use the questionnaire to look across years and compare trends,” Nicola explains.

“The survey is also an opportunity to whistleblow,” she adds. “Usually every year, one child will tell us something that way. So it does have a safeguarding function.”

Investigating incidents

The school investigates all incidents of alleged bullying thoroughly, gathering as many witness statements as possible. Statements are recorded in both the bullied pupil’s and perpetrator’s school files.

The school keeps a continuous running log of any bullying issues that have been reported. Assistant headteacher James Edwards meets with heads of year once a week to review and discuss it.

If the investigation confirms an incident as bullying, James then logs it on the school’s management information system (MIS). The record will also include the type of bullying (physical, verbal or electronic) and the motivation behind it, including whether it was identity based. Incidents not proven as bullying are not logged as such on the MIS, but are managed differently.

“It’s rare we learn about something that’s been going on for ages we haven’t known about,” Nicola adds.

Analysis and response

For staff, key to dealing with bullying is how to analyse the data to help identify and tackle particular issues.

As well as looking at protected characteristics, the school also records whether pupils are bullied because they work hard at school.

Tackling bullying is a priority for the school’s governors, so James creates a regular report for them showing bullying incidents over the last term. “This shows the targets, the perpetrators, who it was reported by, brief details of the incident, and the actions we took,” he explains.

“That analysis then gives you clarity,” Nicola adds. “A particular incident might happen. It might lead to an immediate assembly and a change to one of our policies. We’re not afraid of telling the children what’s happened explicitly.”

Bullying mentors: Taboo

Another way the school gathers information about bullying is through its peer mentors, Taboo. These are specially trained students from years 8 to 11. Their role is to prevent bullying, and support students who may be experiencing it.

“Taboo patrol every day,” explains assistant headteacher Julie Wilson. “There are always two children out and about, and a further two in a ‘sanctuary’ room. This is my classroom, but it’s theirs to use if they’re patrolling and where they can bring students in. It’s warm and has a sofa.”

Taboo mentors regularly rate the safety of areas in the school, ranking them as red, amber or green. “It’s another bit of data for us to gather,” Nicola says.

Taboo hold team meetings every Friday, allowing staff and students to share information about bullying. For example, staff can tell Taboo mentors to keep an eye out for potential issues among particular students or in specific areas of the school.

“It’s also their opportunity to raise questions,” Julie explains. “They can say: ‘I came across this child and they said this. Did I do the right thing?’ It allows me to discuss things with James if there are any issues starting to happen.”

Principled action

The school is proud of what it calls its ‘whole child’ ethos. It aims to create a place where every child feels safe, trusted and valued. Tolerance and inclusion are key values. One of the school’s anti-bullying mottos is: ‘Don’t be a bystander – stand by people’.

For Nicola, data is essential in demonstrating whether these aspirations match the day-to-day experiences of pupils. “If a school stands for something, you’ve got to collect your information about it. Otherwise it’s just words.

“It’s not a quick fix. I think it’s really pertinent that Taboo has been running for at least 12 years, and has developed and changed over that time.”

Even where the school's data has shown fewer bullying incidents over time, Nicola guards against complacency. "We would never want to take that for granted. You can get a year group where everything is thrown up in the air again."

Her final piece of advice? "Go out and look for it. It's important you're proactive as well as reactive. That's why I'm grateful that we've gone out and looked for what's happening around girls – hard though it is to hear."