

Anti-bullying case study: dealing with banter

Redhill, a large mixed secondary comprehensive in the West Midlands, puts significant resources into gathering, analysing and acting on bullying data. It has recently uncovered a rise in discriminatory ‘banter’.

This case study highlights how the school:

- runs annual bullying surveys for students and regularly talks to governors, staff and parents
- uses survey data to produce reports that identify bullying problems and what the school needs to do to tackle them
- records every bullying incident, including discriminatory ‘banter’¹
- uses data to improve its policies, procedures and teaching on bullying

Even regular information-gathering is no guarantee a school will pick up every bullying issue. Josh Bacciochi, assistant headteacher at Redhill in Stourbridge, says older students in particular are reluctant to report discriminatory banter.

“The response we get [from students] is: ‘We can deal with it’,” he explains. “We say: ‘It’s fantastic that you have that resilience, but it’s also important that you feed [any instances] back to us.’ It’s something we didn’t see coming from the data.”

Josh, who oversees bullying for the school’s senior leadership team, says while many students consider such banter harmless, often it gets to the point where “somebody will snap”.

Redhill’s multi-site location means much of the banter takes place as pupils move from building to building between lessons. Often, language is reported by other students or staff who overhear it. “It’s impacting other pupils,” Josh says. “Students

¹ We define ‘banter’ here as comments that might be dismissed as teasing but can often be intended to be hurtful, or are perceived as offensive or degrading.

who do it are not considering the wider community. Whether it affects one pupil or a hundred, we've got a duty to deal with it."

Gathering baseline knowledge

Reviewing Redhill's anti-bullying policy back in 2014, Josh realised that a lack of data meant there was a fundamental knowledge gap about the extent of bullying in the school.

He then set about gathering information from as many sources as possible.

"We engaged all stakeholders: governors, staff at every level, pupils from every one of our key groups (pupil premium, SEN, low, middle and high-ability pupils) – across the whole school. And their parents. This was our raw data to move forward with."

The school did paper-based surveys with a sample of students. Answers were anonymised. "We felt that would give us the most accurate picture," Josh says.

Recording incidents

Redhill also now adopts a more systematic approach to recording bullying. All incidents are logged on the school's information management system, SIMS.

To ensure reporting does not take up too much of teaching staff's time, Redhill has a dedicated pastoral team that does much of the information logging and investigating.

"It's always first logged as alleged bullying," Josh explains. "The pastoral team, or senior teacher, will gather statements from the pupils [directly involved], and statements from every pupil who may have witnessed it. So you could end up with 20 statements on the table. But that's great because that gives you actual data."

Speed of resolution is critical. "If we leave it for two or three days, it will grow and fester – and it's so much harder to resolve."

Josh also uses SIMS to produce regular reports on bullying, racist and discriminatory incidents for the senior leadership team and governors. "Obviously, we're dealing with incidents as they happen. But governors need to know [the wider picture too] and hold us to account."

Culture and ethos

To encourage pupils and staff to challenge bullying, a key message within the school's anti-bullying policy is that it's 'OK to tell.' This is now especially relevant in tackling banter.

"It's all linked to culture and ethos," Josh explains. "We need to ensure that all staff are aware of what is acceptable. It's not enough for teachers to say to each other: 'Did you hear them?' Staff have to challenge it."

Josh says discriminatory banter is now being logged – either verbally among staff or on SIMS. The issue of bullying and banter is also now part of Redhill's personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) curriculum.

"We don't want bullying to be something we only cover for one week in November," he adds.

Data-based strategies

Josh's advice to any school not currently gathering data on bullying is to start by asking questions – of pupils, staff, parents and governors.

"The first time you do it, you'll see lots [of issues]. But actually, they've always been there. But now you've got the evidence to say: 'Ok, that's a problem. Let's deal with it.'

"In terms of evidence-gathering, you need to look at your management system. Where and how do you gather information? How can you make it as sleek as possible?"

Josh says that only by analysing data will you know if your interventions are working - "Doing year-on-year comparisons is key. We'll compare last year's Year 9, say, with this year's Year 10. Let's say there's a big decrease. Well, we know we did a big piece of [intervention] work with this group who had the key problems. So maybe that's had the impact."

Josh also says bullying is something you need to keep under constant review – as the recent issue with banter has shown. Redhill is reviewing its anti-bullying policy again in 2018, and plans to survey all students every year through the school website.

“We’re doing a big push again,” he explains, “because we’ve seen a three-year drop [in incidents]. That might be a trend that’s good, [or] it might be that [the issue has] tailed off. If that’s the case, let’s re-raise the profile.

“You wouldn’t ignore it if you knew your history results were low. It’s the same with bullying.”

Finally, communication is key. “You’ve got to give people the chance to feedback. If you open communication, people will tell you where the problems are. And ultimately it will make your school a safer place.”