Anti-bullying case study: using data to support wellbeing

Wallace High School in Stirling gathers, analyses and shares data to help shape its proactive approach to preventing bullying and supporting pupils' health and wellbeing.

This case study highlights how the school:

- has a number of ways for pupils to report bullying
- records every bullying incident
- uses incident data to analyse bullying trends and identify what the school needs to do to tackle them, highlighting steps they have taken to foster good relations between children from different socio-economic groups and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) children
- uses data to improve its policies, procedures on bullying and inform whole-school responses

"For us, the discussion around data really comes from a much wider look at our pupil support structure," explains headteacher Scott Pennock. "I wanted to make sure we were being as effective as possible in intervening with all children on any issue – including bullying."

Reporting and recording bullying incidents

Pupils at Wallace can report bullying in several ways. One route is through the school's pastoral heads. Each year group is allocated a pastoral head when they join the school. The pastoral head for that year will follow those pupils throughout their time at the school, getting to know each pupil and their family well.

Pupils can also report incidents to their class teachers, tutor group teacher, pupil councils, senior leadership team, or in personal and social education lessons.

The school uses two electronic systems for recording and sharing data on bullying.

Its pastoral notes system – part of the SEEMiS management information tool used by schools and local authorities across Scotland – allows pastoral heads to add detailed notes of any bullying incidents to a pupil's SEEMiS profile whenever needed.

"Everything about that young person's 'story' is in there," Scott explains. "So if a young person comes with a concern about being bullied, a pastoral head would discuss it with them, and we'd look into it and record it in the pastoral notes. I'm confident that whenever bullying incidents are reported they are recorded.

Identifying trends

For all its detail, Scott realised that the pastoral notes system didn't allow staff to easily identify wider themes or trends. "Searching for data can be quite clunky," he admits.

To solve this problem, the school recently introduced a second, data-sharing system, allowing them to draw out key points from the pastoral notes and display them in an overview format. "It's something we developed so that we could share key messages," Scott says. "It's more user-friendly and more immediate. At a very quick glance, staff can get a sense of the composition of the class in front of them. The system will flag up any pastoral notes so that teachers can see that this young person's maybe got a family situation or concerns around a bullying issue."

Where it really scores over the pastoral notes system is in its ability to aggregate data. "It gives us more of a big picture overview," Scott explains. "It builds on the pastoral notes because it visually pulls together any trends that might be happening. This allows us to intervene if we see any issues clustering.

"If there have been three reports of bullying in a certain year group that were all around a common issue (which is not normally the case for us), we would see that. We would say, 'Alright, maybe there's a need for us to reiterate particular messages for that year group'.

Analysing the context

By aggregating data, the school has been able to identify that a third of its pupils come from families in the top 20% in the country in terms of socio-economic status. Another third come from the bottom 20%.

"You really have to know your demographic," he continues. "You have to know the pressures that come from pupils in their communities. We work really hard to make sure we never have any sense of a divide.

"We've also got a programme where a significant proportion of younger pupils come out of class for three periods a week, as part of a broad general education (S1-3 - the Scottish equivalent of Years 7-9 in English secondary schools), and get professional coaching in different sports. Our big driver behind that was about creating team situations where kids from different backgrounds were really bound together."

Supporting young people

For Scott, data is also vital in identifying what matters to young people. "Our system aims to ensure that staff have as much information on pupils as possible. We're trying to create an environment whereby staff are much more in tune with what the issues are for kids that can lead to things like bullying."

For example, three years ago the school set up an LGBT+ student group, after some students reported feeling pressured at school because of their sexual identity. The group raises awareness of LGBT+ issues, such as presenting assemblies during the recent LGBT History Month. Staff have also received two days of training to help them deal with LGBT+ issues more effectively. The school is currently applying for the LGBT Youth Scotland Charter Mark.

The student group also supports pupils and staff when any LGBT+ bullying takes place. "If a pupil keeps saying something about another pupil's identity, then that is a bullying issue," says Scott. "The LGBT+ team in the school will support us in dealing with it. We'll put a mentor in place to help the young person. We will also work on educating the young person who is deemed to be the bully."

Ultimately, he says good use of data is as much about prevention as tackling bullying when it occurs.

"Our model is to have proactive programmes that negate bullying issues as fully as possible. It's about holistic wellbeing for young people and trying to put programmes in place that help to deal with those issues.

"If teachers don't have the information, or we don't share it with them effectively, then they can't do anything about it."

In November 2017, John Swinney MSP, Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills established a Working Group to develop a consistent and uniform approach to recording and monitoring of bullying incidents In Scottish schools. This is now published as Supplementary Guidance on Recording and Monitoring of Bullying Incidents in Schools. The approach is voluntary and will use a version of the existing SEEMiS Management Information System, modified to enable monitoring and analysis of incident trends. It is expected that all local authorities and schools will adopt this approach.