



Carrickfergus Grammar School Developing wellbeing and resilience of pupils

Carrickfergus Grammar School is a co-educational selective school for pupils aged 11-18 years.

The focus of this case study is on the school's commitment to developing the wellbeing and personal resilience of its pupils.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) conducted an inspection in October 2016 and concluded that the school had the capacity to identify and bring about improvement. While the report identified the need to improve the standards achieved by pupils in certain areas, it evaluated the provision for learning and the quality of the leadership and management as good.

Quality of pastoral provision

A particular strength in the provision for learning identified in the inspection report was the quality of care and support provided by staff for pupils. This was evaluated as very good.

The report identified the wide range of extra-curricular activities plus the effective use of pupil surveys and evaluations to inform the developmental planning process within the school as noteworthy. Since inspection, pastoral provision has continued to develop.

Focus on mental health and wellbeing

A specific emphasis has been placed on the importance of mental health and developing pupils' resilience strategies so that they are better able to cope with the range of stresses and pressures they may face in daily school and home life.

In developing teaching programmes, the school has worked closely with a number of external agencies and has been successful in receiving small grants to support some teaching initiatives.

For example, the Parents' Association has been successful in applications for small grants from the Public Health Agency for items such as notice boards that are used to display information relating to mental health and wellbeing. The grants received also supported some basic training for heads of year on mental health issues and allowed for the organisation of a school health fair that promoted the development of strategies for resilience and emotional wellbeing.

Developing effective support networks

Carrickfergus Grammar School has been a strong supporter of the Northern Area Mental Health Initiative which works to help pupils address the pressures they face, including the inevitable exposure to social media and the pressure associated with what can seem to be endless assessment in school.

Dealing with pupils' concerns about body image and bullying are other areas that the school is working hard to address across year groups.

Educating the pupils on these issues in an appropriate manner equips them with the understanding and knowledge to allow them to identify emerging mental health issues and to seek the relevant support in a timely manner.

To this end the school has put in place a number of supporting structures.

These structures range from peer mentors, who receive specialist training, to access to professional counsellors who visit the school.

Advice and counselling

The school supplements the counselling service provided through the Education Authority by accessing community services through an organisation called Carrick Connect.

In addition, the Northern Area Mental Health Initiative has provided the teaching staff with training in the development of resilience strategies that pupils may find helpful.

Tailored programmes for each year group

Particularly strong working relationships have been developed with the charity Action Mental Health which has facilitated the delivery of a teaching programme across KS3 and KS4 covering topics such as the pressures of the process of transition from primary to post-primary, bullying and coping with exam stress.

The pupils engage enthusiastically in these sessions, have an increased awareness of mental health and are able to talk about these issues in a mature and well-informed manner.

Year nine pupils have contributed to an information video made by a commercial company aimed at teachers and pupils which addresses the emotional pressures faced by young people in today's society.

Year 13 and 14 pupils have engaged in a programme organised by the South Antrim Community Network and Woman's Aid which focuses on safe relationships and the school has been identified as a 'safe place'.

The South Antrim Community Network, in co-operation with the Arts Council, promoted an art department initiative called 'Embracing Resilience' and the charity, Nexus, organised workshops on sexual harassment.

Engaging with external stakeholders to enhance provision

There is a great deal happening in the school to prepare pupils for the challenges they face to their mental health and wellbeing and attempts to help develop the resilience required to address these challenges.

The key to the success of such provision is, however, to ensure that the wide range of initiatives, projects and normal curricular provision is well-coordinated and develops the pupils' skills in a progressive and coherent manner.

Much hard work has been undertaken in sourcing and resourcing the programme and in developing productive working partnerships with a wide range of external agencies including local community groups.

Such dedication to the health and wellbeing of the pupils can be overlooked at a time when the emphasis is all too often given to examination outcomes. However, Carrickfergus Grammar believes that strong, resilient pupils are much better placed to succeed at examinations; therefore the time and energy spent on developing these attributes is well spent.

The Principal of Carrickfergus Grammar School, Kieran Mulvenna, offers his reflections on the school's efforts to support pupils in facing the pressures they may face:

Schools' pastoral carers witness at close quarters the intensive toll that life's challenges can take on young people, be that through individual plight, family circumstances or wider issues such as the enduring legacy of the Troubles or the effects of social deprivation.

Our current generation of teenagers is more vulnerable than any before to difficulties with mental health and happiness. Forced by the norms of a digital age to live out the trials of growing up in the unforgiving arena of social media, they depend increasingly on teachers to address distress and develop durable strategies for survival and success. Foremost amongst these strategies are those which foster personal resilience.

None of us achieves best when overstressed, so alongside the obvious wish to provide compassionate support there is also a pragmatic reason for schools to promote personal resilience in a system of relentless assessment. Ultimately it can lead to better educational outcomes.

School budgets are stretched beyond capacity. Two things are therefore essential - that the benefits of any available funding are maximised; and that a school's pastoral aims are focussed firmly on the development of lifelong mental and emotional wellbeing.

This was our dual aim in Carrickfergus Grammar School.

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