

STRONG SCHOOLS SAFE KIDS

RESEARCH PROJECT 2011–2014

Strengthening student social and emotional health and creating a safe and supportive school environment



SCHOOL CASE STUDY 4

The school is a coeducational, Catholic day school located in a regional city to the south of Perth. With a population of around 1000 students in Years 8–12, the school is in a growth phase; the existing campus is being redeveloped, while a new campus is under construction close by.

WHERE DID WE START?

Like most other participants in the Strong Schools Safe Kids research project, the school placed considerable emphasis on pastoral care, employing the slogan 'Choose respect' to encourage an ethic of care among staff and students. While the school already ran a number of programs intended to strengthen this culture of respect, it needed a master plan in order to map and coordinate activities.



WHAT DID WE DO?

Data from Friendly Schools student and staff surveys highlighted some potential focus areas for the school.

Four initial priorities were identified:

- ➔ cyber-safety and cyberbullying
- ➔ student bystander behaviours
- ➔ peer support
- ➔ the role of homeroom teachers in providing pastoral care, as well as the coordinated delivery of pastoral care across year groups

A coordinator was nominated and actions facilitated through the pastoral care team of year coordinators, who met regularly and set aside dedicated planning time. Actions implemented during 2011–2014 included the following:

- ➔ a review of current practices
- ➔ the provision of staff professional learning about addressing bullying behaviours, social and emotional learning and cyberbullying education
- ➔ the development of a cyberbullying policy and delivery of a cyber-safety curriculum for students in Years 8 and 9
- ➔ the installation of a 'cyber-help' button on the school's computer system
- ➔ the introduction of a 'bystander box' for anonymous reporting of bullying
- ➔ the encouragement of positive peer relationships through inter-house competitions and resilience training

“The responsibility is on students, and the focus is on respect. The 'Respect' policy was designed by the students. It came entirely from them, not from us.”
— School leader

“Students' awareness of cyber-safety has improved, and we're not seeing as many issues as we used to on Facebook and mobile phones. We have even had evidence of students acting out positive bystander behaviours on Facebook.”
— Teacher

“For next year, the media group is designing our student diary with the 'Respect' message on the cover, so that it is communicated at as many levels and as frequently as possible. The policy is in the diary, on the school website, on student USBs and in every classroom.”
— School leader

“There is a culture present that we try to encourage – even with our staff, in the way that they speak to and discipline students. I strongly believe that the Christian ethos and a sense of the dignity of the human person runs through the interactions between staff and students.”
— School leader



WHAT CHANGED?

The school faced several challenges during the project, from competing demands on staff time and a crowded curriculum to environmental disruptions due to building works. Nevertheless, strong leadership and embedded structures enabled the school to strengthen its pastoral care practices over the course of the project.

In comparing Friendly Schools student and staff survey responses from 2011 to those from 2014, results indicate that strong positive attitudes persisted across the three-year period. In 2011 and 2014 alike, the majority of students felt connected to their school and teachers, and they typically demonstrated anti-bullying attitudes. However, a slight downward trend was noted with respect to these factors, which may reflect changes occurring within the school environment; continued monitoring will be important in this regard. The percentage of students involved in bullying or cyberbullying remained stable over three years, while students' social and emotional health was comparable to Australian norms.

Many staff also maintained positive perceptions of the school and viewed bullying prevention as highly important. Yet while staff felt confident in their skill levels, their belief that they could make a difference in relation to bullying declined over time, as did their sense of responsibility when it came to preventing bullying behaviours.

School leaders perceived that participation in the Strong Schools Safe Kids project had provided a better understanding of the school climate, as well as the impetus to rewrite school policy. In retrospect, leadership staff felt that it was especially important to include parent behaviour in the school policy and raise awareness of it. Staff willingness to respond to bullying issues remained an issue, as did the need to communicate with staff more frequently about best practices in bullying prevention.

“The school would not have made these changes without our involvement in the Strong Schools Safe Kids project.”
— School leader

“Since the students been back from resilience camp, they seem to be more inclusive of everyone. Those students who found it quite difficult to socialise in the past have now been accepted and involved.”
— Teacher



“I would recommend that schools include parents in their policies, so that it's not just about student and staff behaviour; it's also about parent behaviour and their involvement in the school. We should be providing parent education and keeping them constantly involved.”
— School leader

“You don't change attitudes overnight, but I believe that there's a better knowledge of processes and a better understanding of what's happening. I think that by putting it on the table, it becomes more real, and what the Strong Schools Safe Kids project has done is put it on the table. It's not that we weren't aware of the issues before, but when you're confronted with them, and you're confronted with statistics and figures, then you have to do something about them.”
— School leader

“You can take these programs and do them as add-ons, but if you do them as add-ons then they don't change culture. I think you really need to make these things part of your pastoral fabric in the school. So that's our biggest challenge – to sustain what we have been doing.”
— School leader

