

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 5

The school is a small, Catholic, coeducational day school for Years F–12, located in a rural town south of Perth. With a current population of around 400 students, the school provides primary education for local students and secondary education for both local students and students from surrounding districts. The school culture is based on 'respect for each other'.

WHERE DID WE START?

Even prior to the Strong Schools Safe Kids project, pastoral care and a positive school culture were areas of high priority at the school. To support student wellbeing, the school's leadership team oversaw pastoral care across the primary and secondary schools. In participating in the Strong Schools Safe Kids project, the school hoped to strengthen its existing culture by improving coordination and building staff capacity staff to address bullying behaviour.



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:

- ➔ the physical environment, especially the reduction of bullying hotspots
- ➔ professional learning that empowers staff members to combat bullying
- ➔ enhanced connectedness among Year 7 students
- ➔ a more coordinated approach to pastoral care

Raising awareness of bystander behaviours was added as a fifth priority in 2012.

A school coordinator for the project was nominated, and actions were facilitated during regular meeting of the existing pastoral care and administrative team. An action plan was developed and executed over the course of three years (2011–2014). Key actions implemented during this time included the following:

- ➔ provision of professional learning to staff on topics including social and emotional learning and evidence-based practice in addressing bullying behaviours
- ➔ introduction of additional supervision and structured activities during break times
- ➔ implementation of the Friendly Schools initiative within the primary sector
- ➔ attention drawn to bullying hotspots within the school
- ➔ revision and widespread dissemination of the school bullying policy
- ➔ adoption of an awareness strategy to enhance feelings of connectedness amongst Year 7 students
- ➔ implementation of activities to raise awareness of bystander behaviours
- ➔ establishment of the new key position of part-time head of pastoral care (subsequently increased to a full-time role)

“It is every staff member's responsibility to care for the welfare of their kids, notice if their students are not coping and act on that. Each teacher works to make sure pastoral care is upheld.”

— School leader

“I think we've had a lot more understanding of bystander behaviours.”

— School leader

“The most useful action has probably been the implementation of the Friendly Schools initiative within the primary sector. All of our teachers have run with it, and the feedback has been really good, in particular the bullying techniques and strategies that they've been able to hone in on by using the resource. It's been a really good way of making sure that we look at bullying consistently throughout the year and that we've all got the same approach, and I think that's made a big difference with the bullying issues in the primary school.”

— School leader

“Our pastoral care has been enhanced by the appointment of the head of pastoral care role, which is brilliant and has made a huge difference. It's been great for both staff and students, so I think we've done really well with that.”

— School leader



WHAT CHANGED?

Despite limited time to dedicate to the work and the challenge of being a small school in a rural community, factors including strong leadership, embedded structures, the data generated through regular Friendly Schools surveys and the presence of a committed champion to facilitate action enabled the school to strengthen its pastoral care practices over the course of the Strong Schools Safe Kids project.

Comparing student and staff survey responses over the three-year period, areas of growth include students' perceptions of their connectedness to school and their attitudes to bullying. By 2014, most students were aware of the school bullying policy and knew how to report bullying, and the proportion of students who reported bullying to teachers had improved. Meanwhile, students' social and emotional health as a group was comparable to the Australian norms.

Many of the staff surveyed in 2014 expressed positive perceptions of the school's climate and demonstrated greater confidence in their skills to manage bullying and make a difference. Staff also perceived increased support from non-teaching staff for schoolwide efforts to reduce bullying.

Since the commencement of the Friendly Schools initiative for primary students, there has been a notable reduction in bullying issues within the primary school and a lower level of observed bullying in the secondary school.

“ I think having someone in a pastoral care role makes a very big difference – someone who is accessible and will take on a little bit of that bullying prevention work within their role. It's important that all teachers understand that they are responsible for that too though. ”

— School leader

“ The most useful thing about the Strong Schools Safe Kids project was that it gave us honest, open data from our students. Anonymous surveys are probably the best way to get that data. Otherwise, we would have been basing it on the assumptions we've got about our students, and they're not always on the money. Just getting our staff to hear, 'This is what our students are telling us; this is what we need to deal with' – I think that has been the most valuable thing. ”

— School leader

“ The kids come in and they're happy. They feel welcomed, significant and included. ”

— School leader

“ I think we've seen positive change. I think it's a move in the right direction. ”

— Parent

“ The teachers show a general interest in you and encourage you to do your best ”

— Student

“ The good discussions that teachers do, they help you learn to, you know, be a better person. ”

— Student

“ There's been lots of positive response from parents. ”

— Teacher

