

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 6

The school is a coeducational, independent Uniting Church school for students in Years F–12. It is located in a relatively new urban area and hence has undergone significant growth in student numbers. In 2014, the school had a population of 1110 students and 132 staff.

WHERE DID WE START?

The school aims to be an inclusive community, and pastoral care has always been a priority. However, school leaders recognised the need to tailor their approach to pastoral care in order to keep pace with physical and social changes occurring in the school as a consequence of increasing enrolments.



WHAT DID WE DO?

If the school was to transform its vision for pastoral care into practical action, a coordinated framework and staff capacity building would be required. In 2012, as part of the Strong Schools Safe Kids project, a coordinating team was established and began to meet twice per term for half a day at a time.

After the completion of Friendly Schools student and staff surveys in 2012, three main priorities for action were identified :

- ➔ relationships between staff, students and parents
- ➔ student bystander behaviours
- ➔ responding to bullying

Being a 'one-to-one' digital school, cyber-safety was noted as an additional priority.

In relation to the school's identified priorities, strategies implemented over its two year (2012–2014) participation in the project include the following:

- ➔ roll-out of Friendly Schools initiative in the middle school, partially in the junior school
- ➔ professional learning for key staff through the Friendly Schools initiative, focused on social and emotional wellbeing
- ➔ an increase in break time activities
- ➔ student-focused educational sessions on cyberbullying, cyber-safety and bystander behaviours
- ➔ facilitation of student engagement activities aimed at fostering positive relationships
- ➔ modifications to the physical environment in order to minimise bullying hotspots, such as the canteen and lockers

“ We came into the Strong Schools Safe Kids process because we wanted to evaluate our pastoral program – not because we had any sense that it wasn't working, but because we kept being told that people choose the school because of how we look after the kids. We just wondered whether we had the right structures and whether we could be doing it better. ”

— School leader

“ Turning our school vision into practical action is a priority. We need to develop the principles of our approach to bullying; we need to describe some developmental practices and then develop the capacity of all staff to deliver. We have got the vision, but it's actually about the principles and developmental practices. ”

— School leader



“ It's important to embed change at the top by establishing an empowered group responsible for implementation. ”

— School leader

“ All the teachers interact with the students and make them feel happy around the school. ”

— Student



WHAT CHANGED?

Despite leadership changes, and although time shortage proved to be a significant issue, the school's positive culture has enabled it to establish a safer and more stable environment during its two years of participation (2012–2014) in the Strong Schools Safe Kids project. Key factors in this success were the data generated through regular Friendly Schools surveys, access to the latest evidence-based practices and staff participation in professional learning.

Comparing Friendly Schools survey responses from 2012–2014, areas of improvement included students' increased feelings of connection to their school and teachers; a safer and friendlier school climate; and the growth of supportive attitudes throughout the whole-school community. The percentage of students involved in bullying and cyberbullying remained unchanged. On a group level, students' social and emotional health was comparable to the Australian norms.

Many staff maintained positive perceptions of the school's climate and administrative leadership; expressed the view that bullying prevention education is important; and considered the school's prevention strategies to be effective. Although it declined slightly over the two year period, staff members' confidence in their skill levels and ability to make a difference remained substantial.



WHAT NEXT?

A change of leadership in 2014 led the school to restructure its pastoral system, and to merge the pastoral and administrative roles by using staff mentors rather than staff tutors. The pastoral group formed as part of the Strong Schools Safe Kids project was abandoned, although it was hoped the presentation of final Strong Schools Safe Kids data in 2014 would provide an impetus to re-engage the school leadership team in the Friendly Schools whole school process.

“The first day I came to the school, I definitely felt like I was safe. The teachers made sure that I was feeling okay and that I knew where everything was. They make you feel that you can come and talk to them anytime, like they're willing to give up their time to talk to you.”
— Student

“The teachers make you feel warm and welcomed.”
— Student

“We've just revisited our college mission, and it's been rolled out to the students and all of our community. It's all about respect, integrity and service, so it's pretty much a part of what we do all the time.”
— School leader

“Involvement in the Strong Schools Safe Kids project has helped to keep the issues around pastoral care at the forefront of our thinking, and it has sparked ongoing conversations.”
— School leader

