



A whole school approach: how does it help to build the resilience of young people?

There are many actions schools can take to embed a whole school approach and build the resilience and improve the emotional wellbeing of their students. However, when speaking to staff and students in some of the HeadStart Kent schools, they had similar views on certain topics.

Consideration around how language is used, and situations are approached was viewed as essential. Having a variety of staff available to support students and to be champions at promoting resilience and wellbeing throughout the school was also believed to be important.

It is widely recognised that a child's emotional health and wellbeing influences their cognitive development and learning, as well as their physical and social health and their mental wellbeing in adulthood. Schools have a huge opportunity to make an impact on the healthy emotional growth and resilience of the young people they work with.

HeadStart Kent have taken the eight principles of **Public Health England's 'Promoting children and young people's emotional health and wellbeing – a whole school and college approach'**¹ and created a **Resilience Toolkit** for both primary and secondary schools to use to create a comprehensive plan of activity that benefits the students, staff and the wider community.



The **Award for Resilience and Emotional Wellbeing** has been developed as a way of verifying that the Resilience Toolkit has been carried out to a standard that meets with the guidance provided by Public Health England. The award is given by Kent County Council and The National Lottery Community Fund. Applying for the award allows schools to have their work reviewed and validated.

Eleven HeadStart secondary schools and nine primary schools have now achieved the standard and received their awards.

Staff and students at four HeadStart Kent schools, who have received their Award for Resilience and Emotional Wellbeing, were asked to take part in interviews and focus groups to explore how adopting a whole school approach had assisted to build the resilience and improve the wellbeing of young people.

Nineteen students aged 10 to 16 took part in the focus groups and eight staff were interviewed. The staff had varying levels of involvement with HeadStart and all had different roles. A mainstream, grammar, special school and alternative provision were visited. Themes that were identified are outlined on the following pages.

¹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-children-and-young-peoples-emotional-health-and-wellbeing

What support do students want?

The support young people told HeadStart Kent they need to build their resilience is:

- “People around me understand wellbeing and how to promote it”
- “My overall wellbeing is not impacted by the pressure to achieve and to be perfect”
- “There is always someone for me to talk to”



“People around me understand wellbeing and how to promote it”

Language – what is said, and the language used by school staff affects students. Encouraging, supportive and also when appropriate, informal language, was viewed positively.

Approach – as well as what is said, how situations are dealt with also has an effect. An inability to talk about feelings and a perceived lack of empathy were viewed negatively.

Promotion – having the topic of wellbeing discussed at assemblies and featuring on posters in school was mentioned by some students.

“My overall wellbeing is not impacted by the pressure to achieve and to be perfect”

Support – school staff providing constructive feedback to students around what they have done well, but also what can be improved, was viewed as positive support.

School types – the views around the pressure to achieve varied across the school types. Grammar students had a heightened sense of pressure which could impact on their wellbeing. Students with accessible one to one support from school staff felt less pressure.

Parents – the pressure from parents was also mentioned by some students.

“There is always someone for me to talk to”

Variety – it was viewed as important to have a variety of school staff with the ability to support students with wellbeing issues. They should have different roles and levels of seniority in the school.

Trust – students said they were more likely to seek support from someone they trust and feel comfortable with, or from a staff member they have a good relationship with.

Extra support – they recognised that some students need more support than others and those with additional needs should have a wider network of support in school.

“You can always talk to someone in this school. You can talk to them about anything. I trust them.”

What makes students happy and what do they enjoy at school?



- Building relationships with peers.
- Creative and engaging forms of learning.
- The option to choose subjects that interest them.
- Extra-curricular clubs.

“Some teachers have really engaging lessons, where the lessons are unique, and teachers consider how the students will be engaged.”

What do school staff think?

Leadership and management

- ‘Buy-in’ or support from senior leadership teams and governors was regarded as essential.
- Having staff that are champions at promoting resilience and wellbeing throughout the school, especially if there is resistance to change or lack of understanding from some staff, was regarded as important.
- Some staff mentioned that adding resilience and wellbeing to school plans to raise the profile and drive the agenda forward was needed.
- The advice and support from the HeadStart Kent programme team, as well as the structure and prioritisation the Resilience Toolkit provides were described as enablers.

“Finding people that have got a passion for it in different parts of the school. If they've got a passion for it, they will help drive it [...] I think that having [governor] buy-in and their acceptance earlier on, that was important [...] and being quite strategic with who we got involved across the school.”

Ethos and environment

- There was an appreciation from all that to adopt a whole school approach everyone in the school should be involved, albeit with different levels of involvement. This ensures that it permeates and embeds across the school and is not seen as an ‘add on’.
- Having a shared language and approach to supporting students was regarded as important. Especially when trying set a good example as staff and empower the students to become more resilient.
- Due to the size of their student population, staff in smaller schools explained how it was likely they were more able to work together as a whole school to support students.



“The more you make it so that it is part of your day-to-day, the more impact it will have...”

Curriculum, teaching and learning

- As well as having resilience and emotional wellbeing in the Personal Social Health and Economic education curriculum, embedding it throughout the wider curriculum was considered important.
- Identifying and sharing good practise across the school was also mentioned.
- It was voiced that students putting pressure on themselves or being influenced by parents or siblings, in addition to pressure from the wider school system to achieve in exams, continues to have a negative effect on student's wellbeing.

“It's having that language of resilience in learning, which crosses over to the resilience in emotional wellbeing as well. So that, in itself, has really helped to have that commonality of language.”

Student voice

- It was strongly considered that the student voice should be heard, and students should have some influence over certain decisions made at school.
- Schools are listening to what students want and need relating to their resilience and emotional wellbeing and responding by making changes and introducing support tailored to those needs.



"Pupil's make up the biggest population in the school, we should be hearing them."

Staff development, health and wellbeing

- Focussing on staff wellbeing is a key part of adopting a whole school approach. Listening to staff, making practical changes and committing to the improvement of staff health and wellbeing was considered essential.
- Having access to training to increase the knowledge and improve the confidence of staff to support students with emotional wellbeing issues was also considered vital.
- Most staff mentioned how working together as a team, and supporting each other, creates a good work environment which improved staff and student wellbeing.



"If your staff are not well and thus not strong and are projecting negativity and are miserable, etc., how can you expect your children to be anything different?"

Identifying need and monitoring impact

- Staff explained how it is helpful to have tools available to identify potential issues faced by students in order to respond by providing appropriate support at an individual or group level. Tools such as resilience conversations, the self-reflection tool or adapted surveys/questionnaires were mentioned as being used.
- Although processes may already be in place to identify student needs, it was suggested that it was beneficial to formalise the process using recognised tools.
- Communication among staff and the sharing of intelligence about students was considered essential by staff in smaller schools.



"Having access to really good resources, like HeadStart and the Penn Resilience [Programme] and other things is really vital because it's giving us a practical tool by which direct dialogue can take place in a safe way."

Working with parents/carers

- Staff remarked that supporting parents/carers to develop their parenting skills by providing access to resources or training to better support their children's resilience and emotional wellbeing can be powerful and beneficial.

Targeted support

- It was recognised that while staff in schools can support students with emotional wellbeing issues to a certain extent, access to additional support from other external organisations is also often needed.
- Several staff illustrated how having access to grant funding for students to pursue previously inaccessible hobbies or interests was beneficial and improved student's resilience.
- Some staff remarked that for it to be impactful, support should be tailored to individual student needs.

"One young person, this will stop them taking drugs; this will literally change their lives. If the Pay It Forward grant wasn't in place, they wouldn't have been able to do it, and it wouldn't have led to that. So it's vitally important."



What difference can it make?

Although there are many benefits to adopting a whole school approach for students, staff and the wider community, particular successes recalled by the staff interviewed were:

- **Empowering students** – by introducing a peer mentoring programme, students are empowered and readily take on the responsibility to support their peers with empathy.
- **Calmer school environment** – the development of safe spaces, where students can have time to themselves or access support from staff, has improved the school atmosphere.
- **Improved attendance and behaviour** – school staff have noticed an improvement in the students' engagement and willingness to learn.
- **Happier and healthier students** – having access to support through additional interventions or grant funding has improved the resilience and emotional wellbeing of students.



"Our peer mentors, I'm really proud of them [...] They have done an absolutely great job [...] They asked amazing questions about how they could help certain children."



"[The safe space has] made a massive difference [to the] behaviour in the school, as well, about how children are helping themselves get into a better place."

"...I feel like we do really make a difference, not just academically, but personally, emotionally, socially."

If you are a school or community setting who is interested in finding out more about adopting a whole setting approach to resilience and emotional wellbeing, visit the www.kentresiliencehub.org.uk.

Register your intention to use the Resilience Toolkit to ensure you are offered additional support and updates on the latest resources to assist you on your journey.

Thank you to the staff and students that took part for their enthusiastic and honest views.



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