

Unlocking potential on the coastal strip.

Early identification and targeted support for pupils facing mental health issues and deprivation.

St Catherine's College

Diocese of Chichester

Context

St. Catherine's College is a mixed entry secondary school in the coastal town of Eastbourne, East Sussex. The town has more adults diagnosed with depression than any other area in East Sussex and St Catherine's is in the ward with the highest rates. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) case load rates in the ward are more than four times the average rate across the rest of East Sussex. Alongside the high number of mental health issues, deprivation in the local community is also high, with many of St Catherine's pupils coming from some of the most deprived wards in the country. High crime rates are also recorded in these areas as well as other characteristics associated with poor mental health: people living alone, poor physical health, unemployment, claiming benefits and high levels of divorce or separation.

Within this context St. Catherine's offers a vision of hope with their mission statement that:

'God's children at the heart of everything we do. We listen, learn and achieve together.'

This vision informs the school's approach: to see the potential in every individual and to provide a broad curriculum, rich extra-curricular opportunities and deep support based upon Christian care in order to prepare pupils for a better future. In line with this approach, and in response to the challenges outlined above, St. Catherine's applied for Unlocking Gifts funding to run a project to unlock the potential in their pupils and to try and address issues faced by many schools in coastal towns.

The project

The central aim of the project was to overcome mental health disadvantage through early identification and to targeted support for children with mental health needs. The intended outcomes were for there to be improved rates of attendance, improved progress and wellbeing. Pupils in need of targeted support were identified using an online emotional and behavioural questionnaire, looked at alongside Key Stage 2 SATs results and primary school

attendance data. Using this information St. Catherine's were able to capture individual benchmarks and create bespoke programmes to meet the individual needs of pupils.

The support offered included access to internal mental health support staff and resources, spiritual and pastoral support from the Chaplain, support to improve attendance, as well as input from an educational psychologist or counsellor for higher level needs. Ensuring pupils were known and their needs understood was an integral part of the approach. The data and questionnaire helped with this process, but the college also worked with the local feeder primary schools to understand the needs of those transitioning to secondary education and they also created detailed pupil 'passports' for the target group. These 'passports' were an effective way to share information about pupils with staff in a confidential but accessible way. This helped staff to understand the children's backgrounds before they even joined the school and it could be updated to reflect the progress and continuing needs of pupils.

Key staff members were trained by external experts, helping to develop the internal expertise and capacity to support pupils and to make referrals through the correct systems. This building of the internal resource also helped ensure the continuation and sustainability of the project. The sustainability was also reinforced by the project being designed to sit under the College's overarching Wave programme; a programme designed to overcome a range of barriers to pupils' learning.

In the first year of the project the pupils selected were a pilot group of Year 8 pupil premium pupils and a group of Year 7 pupil premium pupils recently transitioned to the school. For the second year, the project continued to support the pupils identified in the first year and a further 50 pupils were selected from new Year 7 cohort. Once again focusing on the transition from primary to secondary, the College ran a Saturday school day of interactive activities for these selected pupils before they moved to the College. This helped the project team to identify how they could best support the pupils in the transition, with the aim of improving mental wellbeing through this early intervention.

In the second year of the project a further range of activities and services that could be accessed by a range of pupils were developed. A calm room was created, as was a lunchtime mindfulness space and Breakfast Boost Club peer mentoring sessions (in conjunction with YMCA). St. Catherine's also took a whole school focus on mental health across Worship and PSHE and invested in further staff training, including up to date training for the bereavement counsellor so they could better support pupils dealing with death and grief and help them to stay in school.

What worked?

By collecting data at key points throughout the project, St. Catherine's were able to measure any changes in academic achievement and attendance levels. They tracked progress and attendance data for the selected pupils and also use further emotional and behavioural questionnaires during and at the end of each year to measure outcomes. The College felt that the results were not wholly conclusive of the impact of the interventions, however the data did show a slight increase in achievement and attendance in the target groups across the two years. For example, in one Year 7 focus group, average attainment 8 scores increased from 41.6 to 44.89. Whilst a comparison between primary attendance levels and end of year 7 levels showed that attendance in this group only improved for three pupils, nearly three quarters of the group were above the 95% threshold for attendance. The project team believe that this may not have been the case without the additional support that scaffolded the pupils in their transition to secondary.

Despite the focus on information gathering to help staff support the individual needs of pupils, the project team recognised that there were still considerable barriers to providing support. This included learning that whilst the additional staff training was certainly valuable, when pupils were not already diagnosed with a mental health issue, it was beyond the ability of the staff to identify particular issues. Furthermore, where there was an official mental health diagnosis, the school may not have the full information from the CAMHS. The project team also recognised that staff couldn't always identify the full levels of deprivation faced by a child without intrusive questions and so were not always able to offer the help that was perhaps required.

In evaluating the project, the College also recognised that there is not always a direct correlation between mental health and wellbeing support and attainment and attendance, disrupting the premise upon which the project was planned. They also noted that it should not be assumed that there is always a connection between difficulty at home and mental health issues. These reflections show the complexity in trying to provide bespoke support to pupils – patterns cannot be assumed and for every child the picture will be different.

This reflective approach enabled St. Catherine's to adapt their strategy throughout the project. For example, the project team were able to adapt their mentoring approach, focusing on pupils' emotional wellbeing and addressing their worries and anxieties that affected their attitude to learning rather than trying to diagnose mental health issues beyond their professional capabilities. This approach enabled the project team to identify individual struggles as well as recurrent issues across the cohort that they could then try to address more generally.

What next?

After two years developing this project, St. Catherine's are now looking at the new Year 7 intake and how they can learn from the work undertaken to date. The College ensured the project was sustainable through the emphasis on staff training and by taking a reflective approach that has allowed them to adapt and develop their approach throughout the period of the Unlocking Gifts grant. The project team have developed effective methods of support to use with each new intake of pupils and they have also identified key areas to develop over the next year. This includes the creation of wellbeing groups for staff, parents and pupils, developing links with local church support groups, additional resources for pupils, parents and staff and further training for both staff and for pupil mentors.

