Building a safe and caring school

The Ministry of Education recognises that bullying and other disruptive behaviour in New Zealand schools is a serious and complex issue. *Education Gazette* examines school-wide and individual responses to disruptive behaviour and outlines programmes and services available to support schools.

THE ISSUE OF HOW SCHOOLS deal with severe anti-social behaviour, including bullying, has been brought to the surface recently by some high profile media stories.

The Ministry recognises that schools are managing bullying well in most cases and many schools are already applying some of the approaches talked about in this article.

Preventing and addressing bullying – whole-school approaches

The education sector's own experience and the wealth of evidence from the literature on this topic indicate we will not be successful in the long term if we focus only on individual incidents. While, at a point of crisis, it is appropriate to work on individual solutions

with a student (which might require an ongoing behaviour plan), whole-school approaches can be very successful in preventing challenging behaviours, including bullying.

Literature suggests that such an approach, involving the whole school community (students, teachers, parents and whānau and health professionals) in designing and delivering change is seen as more effective than one based only on programmes delivered through the school curriculum.

Preventing bulling – effective whole-school approaches

The most successful approaches and programmes address the issues in a well coordinated and multifaceted way. Whole

school interventions rely on establishing the positive social values of relating to one another and learning that are important to the school community. The school and community are viewed as a system and the way it functions has a powerful influence on school life and the well-being of students. Promoting student well-being and preventing bullying might include:

- A bullying or well-being policy that involves the whole school community. Students, parents and teachers work together to design policy and practices.
- Understanding that the best approach is a commitment to creating a safe school environment. This includes: opportunities for students to build skills in relating to others; respect for diversity; high social support;

PROGRAMMES AVAILABLE TO SCHOOLS

Incredible Years

Incredible Years is a series of programmes that help reduce challenging behaviours in children and increase their social and self-control skills. If you have children with challenging behaviour in your classroom the teacher programme will:

- provide you with strategies to help improve the way things are managed in your classroom
- help you promote pro-social behaviour in the children in your class
- help you reduce a child's aggression and non-cooperation with their peers and teachers.

The School-Wide approach

School-Wide is an ongoing framework that supports schools to create a culture where positive behaviour and learning thrive.

The School-Wide framework is consistently applied across both classroom and non-classroom settings (such as the playground, corridors, buses and toilets). Expectations of each other within the school are clearly defined and taught. The focus is on:

- preventing problem behaviour
- developing students' social skills
- reinforcing desired behaviour
- consistently addressing and reducing inappropriate behaviours
- using data-based assessment and problem-solving to address concerns.

Every year there are opportunities to participate in the Incredible Years programme and in School-Wide. Contact your local Ministry of Education office.

NEW WEBSITE AND TOOLKIT

A new website and toolkit for schools will be launched in the first half of 2012. The website will have two tools available:

1. A New Zealand-developed school climate self-review tool. This will help schools to review the whole school system, identify areas of strength and work out what else could be done to promote a safe and caring climate that acts to decrease antisocial behaviours.
2. A student survey. This will help schools collect data from students. The survey focuses on students' views about the social climate at school. It will explore students' experience of helping and caring behaviours as well as anti-social behaviours. The survey will also identify the strategies used by students and schools to promote helping and caring behaviours and address anti-social behaviours.

opportunities for social civic learning; support for learning; strong leadership.

- Gathering accurate information about bullying and the programmes and approaches implemented. This might include a regular survey and using this information to inform school approaches.
- Providing professional learning and development for school staff.
- A clear message from the whole school community that "bullying is not okay" and a commitment to this.

- Establishing and consistently enforcing consequences for bullying. Consequences should be understood by all students and should combine sanctions with supportive interventions that build self-management skills and alternative positive behaviour.
- Implementing policies and protocols on the use of cellphones and internet use, including rules and consequences for cyber bullying – when students harass their victims via email or student-run web pages, including contact details of internet service providers to track down sources and stop abuse online.
- Having a confidential and safe process for reporting bullying – it is important that both the recipients of the bullying and observers see that they have a responsibility to report bullying.
- Having rules about physical violence that are communicated to the school community in consultation with police, and ensuring there is a clear understanding of the difference between school discipline and New Zealand laws regarding assaults and violence and the legal consequences of violent acts.
- Increasing adult supervision. Adults should be visible and vigilant in areas particularly where there is limited visibility such as hallways, stairwells and locker rooms.
- ensuring staff are aware of student behaviour on buses and on the way to and from school
- Ensuring staff, including bus drivers, know how to identify and respond to bullying, how to reach out to victims and the protocol for contacting the appropriate staff members.

- Fostering a climate of effective listening, conflict resolution and self reflection. Empathy with bullies is encouraged and acceptable behaviour should be clearly communicated – a 'get tough' response does not of itself bring about change in the behaviour of bullies.
- Providing effective support for those who are bullied that includes developing supportive peer and adult relationships.
- Building student leadership skills through curriculum eg health and PE.

Addressing bullying – effective approaches to individual instances

The literature about managing instances of bullying and dealing proactively with its precursors indicates that a variety of approaches can be successful – from those that rely on adults managing and taking action on reports of incidents, to a more student-centred learning and development approach. Successful programmes can include:

- Establishing a protocol for intervening and/or investigating a bullying incident, including identifying appropriate staff to investigate incidents of bullying.
- Using peer mediation approaches where student leadership is taught and encouraged to identify precursors and manage incidents before they escalate.
- Educating all students in the role of the 'silent majority' in helping to maintain bullying behaviour and providing them with skills, scripts and actions to intervene safely.

- An adult separating the victim and the bully.
- Meeting with the victim first, then the bully, then bystanders (expect denial and keep the focus on the behaviour).
- Using restorative justice practices with those directly involved.
- Naming the behaviour, reiterating the rules, and reviewing expected behaviours. Determine if there is a pattern of bullying, what the appropriate consequences should be, and whether there is a need for further interventions for the bully or the victim.
- Determining the reason for the behaviour. Interventions should address underlying causes. Bullies and victims may need additional skills development or reinforcement on how to apply the skills they have. It may be necessary to focus on the subculture of a group of students who bully as a unit.
- Using problem solving strategies to resolve conflict. These might be promoted and modelled elsewhere in the school programme encouraging positive social behaviours.
- Reinforcing alternative behaviours. Ask students to address the thoughts and circumstances that preceded a bullying incident. Guide them in determining more appropriate strategies to express their feelings or resolve conflict. For bullies, this may mean identifying their thinking errors and reinforcing calming and impulse-control strategies. Victims may need help with strategies to avoid provoking a bully, reading social cues, or walking away. Bystanders may need to learn how to reach out to vulnerable peers and to diffuse bullying when they see it.
- Communicating with parents. Recognise that a parent may be angry and upset. Remain calm and understanding. Make it clear that the school does care and that something will be done, explain the school policy, any consequences and ensure any actions are followed.
- Avoiding using parents as a form of punishment for bullying. Use a problem-solving approach and work with parents. Parenting style and family issues often contribute to bully and victim behaviours. Sustained student and family counselling may be necessary to help parents learn new approaches to discipline, communication, and positive interactions with their child.
- Increasing observation of the students involved and contacting their parents, as necessary.
- Being aware that students may also be exhibiting signs of more serious problems, such as depression, an anxiety disorder, or being victimised at home.

USEFUL READING

- *ERO report:* Safe Schools: Strategies to Prevent Bullying *(May 2007):* www.ero.govt.nz/National-Reports/Safe-Schools-Strategies-to-Prevent-Bullying-May-2007

- *Office of the Children's Commissioner's inquiry into school safety: key messages from the inquiry can be found in* Responsive Schools *which describes how the anti-bullying approaches employed by the participating case study schools helped to create safe learning environments for their students:* www.occ.org.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/7269/OCC_Responsive_01.04.10.pdf

- *The Ministry has commissioned a literature review from the New Zealand Council for Educational Research. The review looks at what is known in New Zealand and internationally about initiatives that promote a safe and caring social and emotional climate and address bullying behaviours. Much of this article is based on the draft literature review. We will be releasing the literature review later on in the year.*

SUPPORT AVAILABLE THROUGH THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

The Severe Behaviour Service

This service is for students in years 1–10 who behave in a way that significantly affects their learning or safety, other students' learning or safety, or their own ability to relate positively with other people. The focus is on students whose main difficulty is behaviour, which is severe. A special education caseworker, such as a psychologist or a special education advisor, will work with your student, their family/whānau and you to explore the issues that contribute to your student's behaviour. You will all develop strategies to manage and change their learning environment and behaviour.

Students who need more intensive support

A small number of students referred to the Severe Behaviour Service require even more intensive support, in and out of school. These are often the most complex and challenging students. Their Ministry caseworker might suggest they get support through the Intensive Behaviour Service. Through this service a child's parents have the choice of their child going to a residential school or to a local school with support in place (what we refer to as a 'wrap-around' service).

The Behaviour Crisis Response Service

If you have an emergency behaviour situation in your school, you can call on specialists from the Ministry of Education's Behaviour Crisis Response Service. They can provide you with immediate support to help:

- stabilise your school
- make sure everyone is safe
- prevent the situation deteriorating further
- put an immediate plan in place which will link to an effective and sustained behaviour plan
- link you to other resources and support.
  This service complements the Interim Response Fund which can be used to stabilise a situation and meet a student's immediate needs while a comprehensive intervention plan is put in place.

Ministry guidelines

There is information on working with families and victims of bullying in the Ministry's guidelines for principals and boards of trustees on stand-downs, suspension, exclusion and expulsions.

RTLB service

There are 780 RTLB around the country who should be aware of bullying issues and able to provide you with effective guidance and support for whole-school, class or individual behaviour and learning. ❖