

Fostering mutual respect – Promoting positive behaviours in secondary school

Executive summary

This report explores approaches to promoting positive behaviour in secondary schools in Wales. It highlights the challenges that secondary schools face and includes spotlights of effective practice. The report draws on information from visits to 24 secondary and all-age schools, discussions with officers from 10 local authorities and findings from national surveys for headteachers, staff and pupils.

Positive behaviour underpins effective teaching and learning and supports academic progress. However, during inspection, school leaders and staff have reported a decline in the behaviour of a few of their pupils since the time of the pandemic. In addition, there has been a national increase in fixed-term and permanent exclusions. However, as there is currently no national system to collect data on incidences of poor behaviour in schools, understanding the full extent of the problem remains difficult.

The evidence we gathered for this thematic review suggests that there are many reasons why pupils may display challenging behaviour. These include family instability, socio-economic pressures, mental health problems and additional learning needs. Common behaviour issues identified by schools involve persistent low-level disruption, acts of defiance and, to a lesser extent, physical confrontations. External factors such as the influence of social media and community-related issues such as anti-social behaviour have led to more complicated behaviours seen in schools. Responses to our national surveys across staff and pupils revealed concerns about low level disruption in lessons, poor behaviour in corridors, mobile phone misuse, and increased anxiety among pupils. Leaders also highlighted difficulties in securing timely specialist support.

Schools that have difficulty managing pupils' poor behaviour generally have inconsistent approaches or lack clear policies and processes. Budget constraints and insufficient external support may also be key factors. The most successful schools have high expectations of their pupils and staff. In these schools, leadership of well-being is strong and supported by effective behaviour policies. There is normally a consistency in behaviour management practice and regular professional learning for teachers. Effective schools may also implement trauma-informed approaches to support pupils' emotional needs and carry out regular restorative practices. Engagement with parents and strong community partnerships are also key to sustaining a positive behaviour culture. These help foster a sense of belonging for pupils.

We surveyed pupils, staff, and headteachers. Findings from these surveys reveal differing perceptions of what constitutes poor behaviour and what support is needed. While most pupils describe behaviour in a positive manner, staff and headteachers express concerns about rising disruption and the limited support available. Pupils emphasise the need for mutual respect, calling for fair treatment and consistent approaches to discipline. Teachers highlight common issues such as defiance, verbal abuse, and corridor misbehaviour. Headteachers stress the need for clearer national policies,

increased funding, and more specialist provisions. In the round, the survey responses highlight the importance of consistent policy enforcement, supportive relationships, and effective external support.

The report recommends that schools strengthen their behaviour management systems by involving all stakeholders, including feeder schools, parents and carers, governors and local authorities, in developing clear, consistent policy and processes. In addition, staff should receive specific training on managing disruptive behaviour, especially those of vulnerable learners. Local authority services should provide timely support, share relative information about pupils' needs and experiences efficiently if pupils move within or beyond the local authority, and adopt a consistent approach to family engagement. The Welsh Government is urged to update national behaviour management guidelines and launch a national campaign on positive behaviour. Initial teacher education and induction programmes should also include a comprehensive behaviour management programme.

Our recommendations

Schools should:

- Ensure they evaluate robustly their approach to managing whole-school behaviour and involve all stakeholders in the process of evaluation and planning for any modifications.
- Provide regular and purposeful professional learning for staff to ensure that they develop a secure understanding of effective behaviour management of all pupils, particularly younger secondary pupils, and vulnerable learners and how to respond to their needs.
- Work collaboratively with other schools to support transition and share effective practice to support positive behaviour.
- Evaluate the suitability of their curriculum and make considerate adaptations to ensure that all pupils have access to high quality teaching and relevant and engaging learning experiences.

Local authorities and school improvement services should:

- Strengthen capacity to provide more timely and practical support to schools.
- Adopt an authority-wide approach to promoting positive engagement between families and schools.
- Consider how funding can be allocated directly and more effectively to support individual schools to address behavioural challenges.

Welsh government should:

- Carry out research across primary, secondary and all-age schools to identify trends in behaviour and provide up to date guidance for schools on the most effective support to help improve behaviour.
- Develop a national campaign in partnership with schools to promote and explain the importance of good behaviour with parents/carers and pupils.
- Ensure that initial teacher education and induction programmes include a more thorough grounding in behaviour management approaches and offer a structured programme of support to newly qualified teachers to ensure that they can manage behaviour effectively in the classroom.