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# The role of school support staff in student health and wellbeing

School Health & Wellbeing Research Brief, April 2019

The average secondary school in Wales has 125 teaching staff and 35 support staff, including teaching assistants, ICT and lab technicians, pastoral support staff, special needs support staff and foreign language assistants. How do teaching and support staff work together to support student health and wellbeing and how is their support perceived by students, parents and school staff?

## What we already know...

A positive school environment is important for student wellbeing. 'Environment' includes schools' ethos and social environment and student-teacher relationships are an important part of this.

Teachers, however, tend to have high workloads, leading to the prioritisation of work perceived to be core school business and deprioritisation of work seen as more peripheral to or competing with this.

Much research on the role of 'school staff' in student wellbeing only focuses on teachers and has ignored the role of support staff.



## What we did...

- Four diverse schools in South Wales were selected as case studies. They varied in size, location (urban / rural), the economic circumstances of their students, and their level of attainment in the Healthy School Scheme.
- Individual interviews were conducted with the wellbeing lead in each school and with 13 other staff representing a range of roles, including teachers, teaching assistants and behaviour support managers.
- Thirty students across years 7 to 12 took part in paired interviews.
- Individual interviews were also conducted with 11 parents of children at the schools.
- The interview data were analysed and themes that emerged were reviewed and amended until they accurately reflected the whole data set.

## In a nutshell

- **Students see both teachers and support staff as sources of support for their wellbeing, but appreciate having a choice of who they can approach for help.**
- **Wellbeing support structures vary between schools, but a team of teachers and support staff is advantageous as support staff can devote time to building trust and rapport with students.**
- **Dedicated wellbeing spaces in the school are appreciated by students. They convey a sense that the school cares about student wellbeing and help students to access support if and when they need it.**



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## What we found...

### Wellbeing support structures

- The structure and composition of student wellbeing teams varied substantially.
- In one school an Assistant Headteacher was seen as a lone figurehead for health and wellbeing, whilst in others there was a team of teaching and support staff with designated wellbeing roles.

### Interacting roles of teaching and support staff

- Students approached both teaching and support staff with wellbeing issues and appreciated having the option of approaching whoever they felt most comfortable with.

*"It's really good because I've used the wellbeing office and they're really helpful and supportive and they won't let the issue go until it's all sorted"*

Year 9 student

- Staff perceived that teams of support staff helped to increase the time and expertise available to deal with wellbeing issues and counterbalanced the time pressures on teaching staff.
- Specialist support staff and provision of physical spaces dedicated to wellbeing facilitated quick responses to wellbeing issues and communicated to students that the school cared about them.

### Unique role of support staff

- The standing of support staff as something other than a classroom teacher was seen as important for student wellbeing, particularly in schools in areas of deprivation.
- Here, support staff had more capacity to spend time with individual students, understand their backgrounds and build trust and rapport.
- An example of this was a full time school nurse in one school, who was seen by students and parents as a key source of expert, confidential support, where none might be available at home.

## Issues to consider

A wide range of perspectives from a variety of school contexts were drawn together in this study.

Students may not be aware of the impact of a positive school ethos on their wellbeing if the ethos successfully prevents wellbeing issues arising.

Due to difficulties recruiting parents to take part in the study, most of the parents who took part were also members of school staff and may therefore have had greater insight into school functioning.

## What does this mean for my school?

- **Students can perceive both teaching and support staff as approachable, but it is important that they have a choice over who to approach with their wellbeing issues.**
- **The integration of wellbeing into secondary schools is therefore facilitated by staffing structures which include support staff. Working alongside teaching staff, support staff provide the time and space needed to deal with issues as they arise and build trust and rapport with students and parents.**
- **Providing physical wellbeing spaces in the school can raise students' awareness, and aid the use, of pastoral support structures and convey a sense that the school cares about them.**

Read the research paper in full. Download for free here:

<https://tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02643944.2018.1528624>

Littlecott H.J. et al (2018) Student health and well-being in secondary schools: the role of school support staff alongside teaching staff. *Pastoral Care in Education* 36(4): 297-312