



Assessment Arrangements Case Study

Barrhead High School

Barrhead High School is a six-year, non-denominational, comprehensive school serving the town of Barrhead. It has three associated primary schools and the catchment includes pupils from across all SMID¹ categories.

This session the school moved into a new state-of-the-art building in the centre of Barrhead.

Background

In recent years, mirroring the national picture, the school was finding that an ever-increasing number of young people were presenting with mental health difficulties, including extreme anxiety. The young people concerned were not just struggling with the pressure of exams, they were having difficulty accessing the school curriculum. This was having an impact on their progress in school as well as their life outwith school.

Issue

Assessments and tests in school increased the feeling of stress and panic, especially during prelims or the SQA exams. The stress and anxiety the young people were experiencing were not, the 'normal' feeling of anxiousness that you would expect to see in teenagers taking exams. This was an anxiety that was becoming unmanageable for the young people. It was having a significant impact on their ability to perform in exams as well as on their mental health in the lead-up to any assessments.

Class teachers and pastoral staff were also expressing concerns about how the pupils were coping in the lead-up to assessments, as well as during the assessments themselves. We were seeing pupils who were not achieving their potential. When chatting about their work or completing 'informal' tasks the pupils were easily meeting course criteria; however, when put into a formal assessment situation, they were falling short of what their teachers expected them to achieve.

¹ SMID stands for the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation which is the Scottish Government's official way of identifying areas of multiple deprivation in Scotland. More information can be found [here](#).

Strategies and supports

Time out

Class teachers were made aware of the pupils' difficulties through the school's system of sharing information about young people with additional support needs. Teachers offered support to meet deadlines and complete course assignments and pupils were encouraged to attend supported study — nearly all departments run an open-door policy at lunchtime for pupils who need some additional support. In addition, the pupils had 'time-out' cards to allow them to come to support for learning/pastoral class if and when required.

Modified timetables

A small group of pupils had a modified timetable, where they could spend some periods in the support-for-learning department each week. This adaptation was made after a multi-agency meeting where it was decided that some pupils' needs were so significant they needed a reduced timetable. This meant that the pupils would benefit from time to consolidate class work, they would be relieved of some of the pressures of homework/course work, and they would have regular contact with an adult and with other young people who were also feeling anxious. Staff were not timetabled to directly support the pupils who were suffering from anxiety or other mental health difficulties. However, the department is busy and there is always an adult in the room supporting other pupils.

Support-for-learning base

Pupils who need support are able to go to the support-for-learning base and the pastoral base for 'drop-in' advice. The support-for-learning department created a 'senior' area for pupils who were struggling with exams — two large desks behind a room divider. The pupils made this area their own: they created a 'wall of positivity' where they would write positive messages on sticky notes and pin them to the divider.

Other support

As a school we looked for guidance from the educational psychologists and the health and wellbeing officers in the local authority. Advice was also available from organisations such as the NHS and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS).

Pupils were also supported through programmes the school ran:

- ◆ Living Life to the Full
- ◆ Headstrong
- ◆ Confidence group
- ◆ Youth councillor
- ◆ Educational psychology for individual and group work
- ◆ Individual programmes looking at building reliance
- ◆ Individual drop-in with pastoral and support-for-learning staff

In some cases, where appropriate, the pupils were referred to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (or to their GPs).

Evaluation

When these supports were initially put in place the school had a small number of young people who were all struggling with anxiety and their mental health. As a result, we ended up with a group of about eight pupils who were regularly in the department at the same time. What we hadn't planned is that the pupils would end up supporting each other and some of the younger pupils who came into the department. Consequently, we have ended up with a very strong supportive ethos that has benefited everyone.

However, we were concerned as a school that if one or two pupils got separate accommodation or additional time for exams to support their mental health then we would be inundated with requests for support. So as a support team, and with input from the school's SQA co-ordinator and the educational psychologist, it was agreed that pupils who were asking for additional assessment arrangements for their exams would have had to have been receiving additional support for an extended period of time (more than three or four sessions) for anxiety or issues relating to their mental health.

Procedures were put in place that any requests for assessment arrangements had to go through the young person's pastoral teacher and they would be required to provide evidence of the ongoing support. This could take the form of being aware of ongoing CAMHS appointments, attendance at groups within the school, an adapted curriculum, evidence of additional time needed from class teachers, etc (following the guidance published on the SQA assessment arrangements web page).

Once the requests for assessment arrangements for the pupils were made, the school then continued to follow the SQA guidelines. The SFL staff would speak to a pupil about the arrangement required, then with the SQA co-ordinator we would agree if the arrangement was suitable and the evidence robust. A letter would then be sent home for the pupil and parents to discuss and sign to agree any supports put in place. The request for support was often separate accommodation as pupils felt that sitting in a large exam hall with all of their peers was overwhelming. Additional time was also frequently requested, as pupils with anxiety or mental health issues would take longer to settle down at the start of the exam and would struggle to stay focused for long periods of time.

Assessment support

On the day of the exams, the support-for-learning department would open early — normally around 8.15 for an exam starting at 9.00 am. Pupils could come directly to the department and sign-in with the staff there, meaning that they could avoid the hustle and bustle of the whole senior school in signing-in together. Tea, bananas and snacks were available for the pupils as we often found that they were too nervous to eat before coming into school. Basic games and activities were left out such as Four in a Row, jigsaws and mindfulness apps to offer the pupils a distraction if they wanted one.

Pupils could stay in the support for learning base until they needed to go to the exam. Where possible we used the library as a separate space for the pupils. The layout of the room means that they are not sitting in rows but are spread out across the room with small shelving units separating them from their peers.

The same supports that had been put in place in the mornings were also available during the breaks from the exams. Pupils had the chance to have their break in the support-for-learning

base, where there were fewer pupils, plus tea, snacks and some games to distract them if needed.

The group of pupils that we initially put supports in place for are now undertaking their exams as S6 pupils, their third diet of exams with support. All of the pupils involved in receiving support for anxiety or other mental health issues have, at this point, got a positive destination to move on to — college, university or modern apprenticeships.

In the junior school this group of pupils had not achieved the results that staff felt they were capable of. However, with the ongoing support (in and out of school) for their mental health and the alternative assessments arrangements put in place for their exams almost all of the pupils have managed to find success in their S5 exams and hopefully will see this improve further in their final exams in S6.

The feedback to the support has been positive and pupils feel that they are having a more successful exam experience.

SQA co-ordinator:

This group of candidates was exceptional in that their feelings and emotions regarding the exam experience was one of heightened anxiety. Supports put in place gave the pupils a sense of agency and control that allowed them to operate in tandem with the exams but also to function as an autonomous group, offering one another support. Familiarity — using the same room, being with the same candidates in all of their exams across prelims and finals, meant that the pupils' confidence was increased. I am certain that these candidates' results would not have been achieved had they not had the support put in place that was facilitated by the school.

Guidance teacher:

The pupil that I have on my caseload would not have been able to access the exams had they not had a quiet space to prepare and separate accommodation (for their exams). Their struggle with anxiety meant that they needed additional time to process information and separate space meant they were not worried about the others around them.

S6 pupil:

I was able to go to support for learning before my exams. This meant that I did not have to wait with all of the other pupils, which makes me very worried. I liked going into a smaller room. The large exam hall would make me panic and I wouldn't be able to remember anything I had revised. I liked spending time before my exam somewhere I felt safe and comfortable.

S6 pupil:

It's calming and relaxing going to the base before exams. Everyone else is in the same situation and understands how you feel. You can be yourself and not worry.