A GOOD PLACE TO LEARN?

What young people think makes schools healthy

Children's physical and emotional health are key determinants of their ability to learn. Since the launch of the Government's Healthy Schools Programme, promoting health in schools has become a national priority – but how this translates in practice varies enormously from school to school.

This research summary pulls together the findings of a survey of secondary school students across London, supported by the King's Fund, which asked young people what they thought the priorities should be in creating healthier schools for the future. It analyses their concerns under four broad headings: healthy living, emotional well-being, school environment and 'having a voice'. It concludes that the starting point for healthier schools should be to ensure that all students have a genuine say in the development of the school environment which, ultimately, will have a lasting impact on their lives.

The happier your school environment, the more you enjoy things and the more you learn.

London secondary school student,
Health in Schools survey

Under the banner of its Healthy Schools Programme, the Government has signalled its intention, through a series of policy announcements, for schools to take on an ambitious role in improving young people's health,

spanning health promotion, the reduction of health inequalities, and better physical and emotional well-being. *(See panel 1)*

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1 **THE POLICY FRAMEWORK**

Key Government statements about schools' role in young people's health include:

1997: Excellence in Schools (White Paper). This sets out the Government's proposals for raising standards in education.

1998: Our Healthier Nation (Green Paper). This set out the role schools could play in promoting health and addressing health inequalities.

2000: The National Healthy School Standard (formerly known as the National Healthy Schools Scheme). This promotes a national standard that stresses the importance of investing in physical and emotional health, but allows participating schools and local partnerships to decide what they need and how they will implement change. Teachers in participating schools have reported an improvement in pupil behaviour, and Government inspectors' reports have measured a link between schools adopting the standard and improved educational attainment.

2001: Tackling Health Inequalities (Department of Health Consultation Paper). This states that education is a key influence on patterns of behaviour that have an impact on health, as it is in school and early adult life that these patterns are established.

Work is also underway to develop a National Service Framework for Children to improve children's health and social care services. Former Public Health Minister Yvette Cooper has also supported the National Heart Forum's young@heart plan, which includes a proposal to make health-promoting policies in schools a statutory requirement.
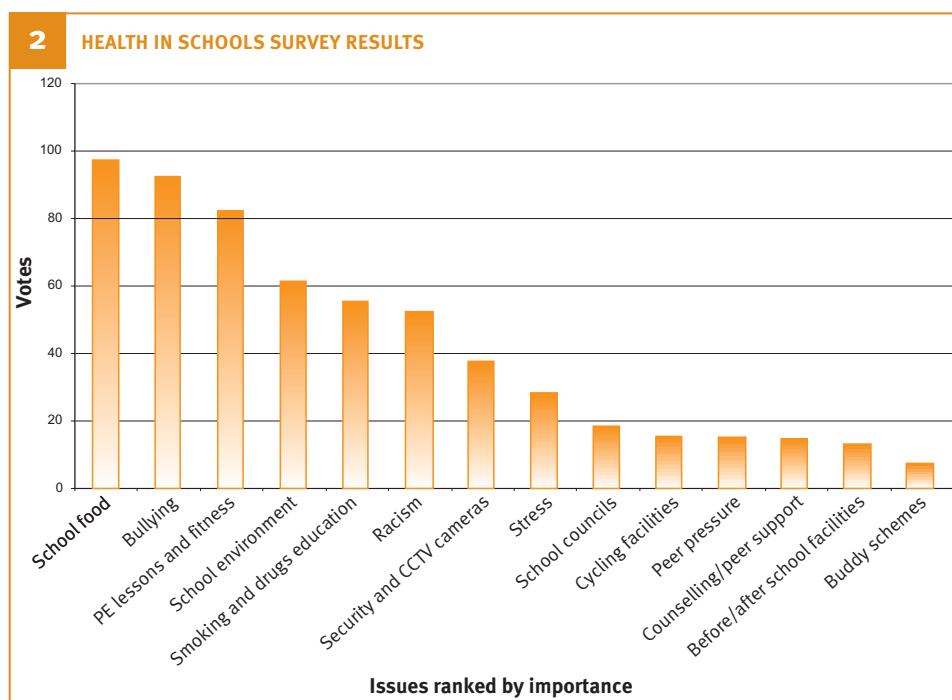

With support from the King's Fund, a group of young people aged 12–18 designed a Health in Schools survey to find out what a sample of secondary school students across London felt the priorities should be in creating healthier schools.

On healthy living, the young people asked about school food, physical education and fitness, smoking and drugs, cycling, use of school facilities out of hours, and how schools could help students make healthier choices. Challenges to emotional well-being and mental health – including bullying, racism, stress, and negative peer pressure – were explored. Existing schemes to help young people cope, such as counselling, peer support and 'buddy' schemes, were assessed.

Questions were asked about schools' physical environment and atmosphere, including security. The survey also probed perceptions around 'having a voice' – what value did young people think was placed on their opinions, and how did they rate school councils?

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Nearly 400 pupils from 41 London schools took part. Three issues emerged as key concerns: the quality, price and appropriateness of school food; the lack of provision for enough regular, enjoyable exercise; and the problem of bullying. *(See panel 2)*

2 **HEALTH IN SCHOOLS SURVEY RESULTS**

Votes

120
100
80
60
40
20
0

School food
Bullying
PE lessons and fitness
School environment
Smoking and drugs education
Racism
Security and CCTV cameras
Stress
School councils
Cycling facilities
Peer pressure
Counselling/peer support
Before/after school facilities
Buddy schemes

Issues ranked by importance

Students clearly need more support to make healthier lifestyle choices. Some were aware of the importance of eating healthy food, but nearly half had no breakfast before school, a factor linked to low levels of concentration and poor health. There were complaints about monotonous and expensive school meals, and a failure to cater for special dietary requirements – for example, Halal meat for Muslim students.

There were wide variations in the number of hours spent in physical education classes, with nearly two thirds of respondents saying they didn't do enough organised exercise. Nearly a quarter would like to cycle to school, but only two per cent did so in practice, put off by a fear of traffic and lack of secure bike sheds.

There is clearly a problem with stress in schools and its impact on health – with bullying playing a major role. More than half of the respondents said that they had been bullied – higher than in other surveys. Many said that schools did not treat bullying seriously enough. Nearly a quarter had experienced racism.

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There was widespread support for school counselling schemes to deal with stress, but in practice pupils had many reservations about seeking such support. Victims of bullying were more likely not to seek help than go to counsellors or peer supporters.

Young people's ideas and energies are an important, under-utilised resource in shaping better school environments.

Many highlighted the link between the school environment and their ability to learn. Basic facilities and cleanliness were strong concerns, but the less tangible 'feel' of a school, including friendliness, and being noticed as an individual, were also felt to be critical.

Students clearly signalled their desire to be part of an environment where they felt valued and were listened to. Nearly four in five respondents supported school councils, but there was a feeling that they should be more powerful and representative (some felt they were chiefly made up of students perceived as 'popular' or 'clever'). A substantial minority of pupils at schools with school councils either did not know that they existed, or knew little about what they did.

The survey suggests that young people's ideas and energies are an important, under-utilised resource in shaping better school environments. By exploring their views and promoting these to London's decision-makers and opinion formers, it hopes to show that healthier schools must give students a greater say in what they think creates a good place to learn. This will undoubtedly have some resource implications, particularly in terms of supporting staff and staff time. But a 'whole school' approach can only succeed if it taps into the ideas and energies of all its students, as well as those of staff.

Background

The survey. In October 2001, all 650 secondary schools in London were invited to take part in the Health in Schools survey, as part of the King's Fund's Imagine London programme to explore young Londoners' views of their city. The questionnaire, devised by a steering group of young volunteers, asked students to vote for their top three out of fourteen issues, then answer detailed questions on as many as they liked.

The findings. 392 questionnaires were returned from students in 41 secondary schools (mostly state sector, including one school for physically disabled young people and one for young people with autism) from a mix of boroughs. Some of the questions led to quantitative data from which we have derived statistics; others prompted more qualitative answers.

Profile of respondents. Of those selecting to complete relevant profile questions, 85 per cent were aged 14–16, 54 per cent were male, and 46 per cent female. Cultural background was described in 58 different ways. 54 per cent of those who described their cultural background in terms of race and ethnicity were from minority ethnic groups.

Key findings

Chips and burgers are cheap, but sandwiches and salads are so expensive no one ever buys them.

The catering staff should learn what's good for students and helps them get through the day.

To be honest, we don't really like healthy food!

I hate PE because when you are not doing the right thing you get shouted at.

PE needs to be much more appealing for children not interested in sports.

There's no point talking about swimming pools when we can hardly afford footballs.

We need the facts, but we don't want to be lectured. That way, when we make choices we know what we are letting ourselves in for.

Schools would be healthier if they clamped down on bullying more – it makes you feel bad about yourself.

Chuck the bullies out instead of giving them a detention all the time!

Bullying is a serious thing, but schools tend to wait till the second time before they do anything.

Healthy living

Eating patterns. Studies have linked low blood-sugar levels on waking to poor memory, concentration and learning.[1] Our survey found that 45 per cent of respondents did not have breakfast before school. For lunch, most had packed lunches or snacks. Some said that they did not eat at all in the school day.

Price and appropriateness of school meals. There were concerns about the price of school food, particularly healthy options. Complaints about the monotony of school meals were common, and the need for more culturally appropriate food such as curries, Jamaican and Halal foods, was pointed out. Most respondents did not know what would make food healthier, and some doubted whether healthy food would taste good.

Physical education. The British Heart Foundation recommends that young people do an hour's physical activity a day.[2] Two thirds of respondents did two hours or less physical education (PE) per week, and the same proportion felt they did not do enough, in spite of mixed feelings about the subject. Some complained about a lack of facilities, and theory lessons, sometimes taking an hour a week, were generally disliked. Having a choice of activities made PE much more enjoyable.

Getting to school. Half travelled to school by bus, over a quarter walked, and only two per cent cycled. Nearly half said that they would cycle if it were safer. Other disincentives included distance, having too much to carry, not owning a bike and not being able to ride. Only one quarter had a secure place to leave their bikes at school.

Smoking and drugs. Respondents said that smoking and drug-taking were widespread and education about risks should start in the first year of secondary school. They wanted the facts, in a neutral and non-moralistic way, and to learn in workshops using drama. Over two thirds wanted drugs education from outside experts, including ex-users. Only one in ten felt this should be taught by teachers.

After-school facilities. Most students had some access to after school facilities, and nine out of ten said that these were important. Facilities for sporting activities and practical support such as computer clubs, internet access and homework help were popular.

Emotional well-being

Bullying. Research shows that being bullied at school correlates with anxiety and depression.[3] Our survey suggests that this experience is more widespread than some previous surveys.[4] Over half the respondents said that they had been bullied, and one in five admitted to bullying others.

Respondents said that schools did not treat bullying seriously enough. A quarter felt that access to help at school was bad or very bad, and there was some support for using sanctions such as exclusion and bringing in the police. Students turned to their own families and teachers for help first – very few said that they would go to school counsellors or peer supporters.

Racism. More than one in five had experienced racism at school, and about one in ten said that it worried them a great deal. The media were felt to play a part in encouraging negative stereotypes.

Stress and peer pressure. Respondents described a range of stress-related symptoms, including loss of concentration and energy, sleeplessness, and chest pains. Emotional signals were tearfulness, feeling overwhelmed and wanting to harm one's self or others. One third felt other students were the main cause of stress, followed by too much homework, exam pressures, and issues outside of school. Two thirds thought anti-stress workshops could help. Nearly half had felt the effects of peer pressure.

Counselling and peer support. Nearly nine out of ten respondents thought that counselling or peer support in schools was a good idea. Half had access to school counselling, but more than one in ten did not know whether counselling was available in their school. Two thirds had support from other pupils, including peer mentors, prefects and older pupils helping with, for example, reading, but there were some reservations about officially appointed counsellors who were also school peers or teachers. Suggestions for promoting advisory services included advertising, and ensuring sessions were confidential, unbiased and discreet.

Buddy and befriending schemes. About half the respondents had been anxious about starting secondary school and did not have much prior information about their new school. Students who had information – from personal friends, older siblings or induction days – were less likely to feel concern. Two thirds approved of schemes where older students befriend new ones, but 'buddies' could sometimes be bullies.

School environment

A pleasant and secure environment. Respondents linked school environment, emotional well-being and learning, and saw 'environment' as spanning physical and emotional aspects. There were widespread concerns about litter and a lack of basic facilities, such as lockers and clean toilets, but teachers' friendliness, individual attention and respect for cultural diversity were also valued. Ideas for improving interiors included new chairs, better and brighter decoration, and a graffiti wall. Outside, students wanted more litter and recycling bins, seats, grass and trees, rather than cement playgrounds. Sports facilities like football goals and swimming pools were mentioned. Four in five respondents said their schools needed security protection, and supported closed-circuit TV systems, reflecting widespread fears of bullying, violence and 'stranger danger'.

Having a voice

School councils. Two thirds of schools taking part had school councils, but one in ten students did not know whether or not they had one. Nearly a third of students did not know how schools councils worked or what they had achieved. There were some fears that councils tended to represent only popular or clever students. Four out of five students thought that school councils were a good idea but wanted them to be more representative and powerful.

Key recommendations

These recommendations are drawn from the views of young people in the survey. Many of them may have financial and resource implications in terms of new facilities, teacher time and training. Others, however, may be achieved by approaching existing provision in a slightly different way. Further discussion about some of these issues within schools may generate more practical ideas.

Healthy living

- Good school food should cater to the needs, tastes and cultural backgrounds of students and providing cheap, healthy options.
- Students should do more PE at school, and have some choice about which activities they do.
- Smoking and drugs education in schools may be more effective if taught by ex-drug-users and outside experts rather than teachers. It should be taught from a younger age and emphasise the facts and complex risks, rather than demonising drugs in general.
- Safe cycling routes to and from school should continue to be developed in partnership with local authorities, and secure facilities for storing bikes provided in schools.
- Young people should be involved in choosing before and after school facilities to suit their needs. Students taking part in the survey asked for educational support, such as computer clubs and homework help, as well as various sporting activities.

Emotional well-being

- 'Whole school' approaches to bullying that build on young people's views and tackle racist bullying and peer pressure need to be developed.
- Stress needs to be recognised as a serious impediment to the mental health and well-being of some students. Careful management of course-work deadlines and exams across the curriculum may relieve stress for students, as well as taught methods of coping with stress.
- Further evaluation of the effectiveness of counsellors and peer supporters in schools is needed. Young people can help identify the barriers that prevent students from accessing support.
- Secondary schools need to work in partnership with primary feeder schools to develop solutions to student anxiety about moving to

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secondary school. Popular solutions that some schools have adopted include befriending schemes, and early head-starts for first-year students at the beginning of term.

School environment

- Provision of basic facilities such as clean toilets and general cleanliness should be a priority in every school.

Having a say

- Inclusive school councils with real power to make changes to the school environment would empower students to improve the school themselves.

References

1 British Nutrition Foundation, www.nutrition.org.uk

2 The Department of Health and the Food Standards Agency. *National Diet and Nutrition Survey of 4–18 year olds*. London: June 2000.

3 Salmon G, James A and Smith DM. 'Bullying in schools: Self-reported anxiety, depression, and self-esteem in secondary school children' *BMJ* 1998, 317: 924–925. Hawker DSJ and Boulton MJ. 'Twenty-years Research in Peer Victimisation and Psychosocial Maladjustment: A meta-analytic review of cross-sectional studies'. *The Journal of Child Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines*.

4 Department for Education and Employment, *Bullying – don't suffer in silence*. An anti-bullying pack for schools. London: 2000.

IMAGINE LONDON YOUNG PEOPLE'S PROGRAMME

The Imagine London programme consists of a young members' scheme, a series of events directed by young people and an interactive web site, www.imaginelondon.org.uk. It centres on five broad themes: transport, environment, crime, healthy living and emotional well-being.

Imagine London culminates in an opinion poll and event in July 2002 that brings together the five themes in a young people's health and well-being manifesto for London.

The following summaries are available from the King's Fund bookshop:

- Imagine London Transport Event – Key Points
- Imagine London Environment Event – Key Points
- Imagine London Crime and Safety Event – Key Points
- Imagine London Healthy Living Event – Key Points
- Imagine London Emotional Well-being Event – Key Points