



Introduction to the Well-being Award for Schools

Developed in partnership with the National Children's Bureau (NCB), the Wellbeing Award for Schools is intended to help schools prepare and equip themselves to promote emotional wellbeing and positive mental health across the whole-school community. NCB's vision is an education system where good emotional wellbeing and mental health are at the heart of the culture and ethos of all schools, so that pupils, with the support of their teachers, can build confidence and flourish. Evidence shows us that wellbeing is of central importance to learning and attainment, with high levels of wellbeing associated with improved academic outcomes. Conversely, pupils who have mental health problems are more likely to have academic difficulties at school and experience social disadvantage later in adult life.

To achieve this vision, NCB advocates the use of a 'whole-school approach' where all aspects of the school experience are harnessed to promote the emotional wellbeing and mental health of pupils and staff. It is an approach where emotional wellbeing and mental health is everybody's business.

The Wellbeing Award for Schools is a welcome opportunity to recognise the exceptional work that schools do in this area. The key features of a whole-school approach form the basis of the award, and it provides schools with a benchmark of best practice against which to test itself. We believe that this celebration of success will encourage more schools to adopt an approach that puts emotional wellbeing and mental health at the heart of what they do.

Principles behind the Award

There are four key principles driving the ideas and recommendations behind the award:

1. Emotional wellbeing and mental health are a continuum. Related issues can range from positive attitudes and behaviour, through to experiences of emotional distress and mental disorder.
2. Schools already experience and manage emotional issues on a daily basis; the objective is to minimise the impact of such issues and maximise the effectiveness of any responses.
3. Emotional wellbeing covers a range of dimensions, such as resilience, character building, relationships and self-esteem, etc. Understanding both developmental and mental health awareness is critical.
4. Creating a positive school culture requires a whole-school approach that is led from the top while involving all in the school community.

Embarking on the award process does not imply that your school is failing in this area, but rather that you have recognised the needs and demands of your school are changing and you are committed to responding to these. Much of this change will be apparent in the issues that schools face on a daily basis. Seen through the lens of academic achievement and attainment, our appreciation of the positive and negative impact of emotional and mental health challenges improves.

Taking your school forward to create a whole school capable of promoting and protecting the emotional wellbeing and mental health of young people and staff requires clear and effective leadership. The same strategic purpose given to other school improvement and change programmes will be required.

We recognise that for many adults and children, mental health can be seen as a difficult and at times frightening issue. As a society, we are starting to deal with this stigma, but, unfortunately, there still exist plenty of negative views and attitudes that cause barriers to go up. As professionals and as parents, we can feel unprepared and ill-equipped to deal with these issues, seeing mental health as the domain of the 'specialist'. As a school community already stretched with many demands, re-visioning how we view emotional wellbeing and changing a school culture to accommodate this vision can be challenging.

Given these and other aspects, it is imperative that each school builds on its strengths and uses its own communities as a source of support. It is also critical that each school develops its own narrative on what is to be achieved and why. In turn, this narrative will gain impact through weaving and connecting it with other values and beliefs already established within the school setting.

The whole-school community

One theme that is central to the award is the need for schools to draw the wider community and relevant stakeholders into the centre of the change process. Parents and carers are one such group. Evidence shows that, for parents, the emotional and mental health needs of their children is of increasing concern, and often parents look to the school to support and inform them. Pupils also need to be given the opportunity to express their own voice and this can be an influential source of good ideas for any school looking for innovative and appropriate solutions.

One important aspect of this broad community of stakeholders are utilising those who offer help and support generally and can provide access to specialist interventions. There is no doubt this aspect of a school's strategy (i.e. how to access different types of help) is often a thorny issue. Currently there are recognised gaps in provision, limits and barriers to getting the help needed and poor communication and understanding of roles. This award cannot solve these problems, but it will offer ideas and solutions on how best to manage and create links and partnerships needed to help those with clinical needs.

As another critical group of the whole school community, the award views the wellbeing of staff as significant as that for pupils. Staff wellbeing is increasingly recognised as 'under challenge' while schools encounter increasing pressure from over-stretched resources. Expecting staff to respond to the emotional needs of their pupils while feeling exhausted and overwhelmed themselves is a barrier to the wellbeing of all involved. Equipping teachers and others with the know-how and skills needed to be better informed on the issues surrounding mental health is essential. Most of the significant changes brought about by the award through staff will not be in active interventions but in the daily interactions and relations in classrooms, corridors and playgrounds. All staff have the capacity to share and promote the messages of positive mental health, modelling the behaviours themselves and making emotional wellbeing a matter of importance and at the centre of the school's agenda/conversation.