Unprecedented challenges and innovative responses: schools' and colleges' experiences of supporting mental health and wellbeing during the coronavirus pandemic

EBPU
Evidence Based Practice Unit

A partnership of

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Background

Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, schools and further education colleges across the country have faced challenges in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their students and staff. A wide range of approaches have been adopted in response, including many examples of innovative practice. This briefing incorporates the reflections of staff from 10 educational settings across England, including primary, secondary and college provision in the private and state sectors. We gathered this information during four webinars, held to support evaluation of wellbeing provision within these settings. The webinars were held at timepoints during which varying levels of restrictions were in place.

This briefing aims to share learning about the challenges faced in a diverse group of education settings, and the innovative approaches taken in these settings to tackle these challenges. We include specific examples of approaches that may be of use to other schools and colleges.

April 2020	National lockdown; schools and colleges closed to most students for face-to-face teaching
October 2020	Schools and colleges open for face-to-face teaching: a 'bubble'[1] system in operation in most settings
January 2021	National lockdown; schools and colleges closed to most students for face-to-face teaching
October 2021	Schools and colleges open for face-to-face teaching: the 'bubble' system no longer required but individual isolations continued

[1] An approach designed to limit the spread of the coronavirus by separating children and staff into groups or 'bubbles'.

Challenges to supporting mental health and wellbeing during the coronavirus pandemic

The primary challenges staff identified in supporting mental health and wellbeing varied across the timepoints. They include issues relating to logistics, the demand for support and the availability of support.

National restrictions

Specific challenges were identified in relation to the national restrictions put in place to reduce the spread of the coronavirus. During the initial school closures, the lack of face-to-face contact created difficulties in identifying students in need of support and left staff unsure about the immediate impact of the lockdown on their students' mental health. In addition, there were safeguarding concerns about the impact of the restrictions on some students, particularly while existing procedures and risk assessments were being adapted for the new circumstances. Other logistical challenges to supporting wellbeing included organising free school meals vouchers and access to IT so that all students could continue to access education and support. These issues persisted through both the March 2020 and January 2021 lockdowns. Staff also described significant challenges faced by parents and carers, either in effectively supporting children who were struggling with their mental health, or in relation to the parents' and carers' own feelings of anxiety and stress.
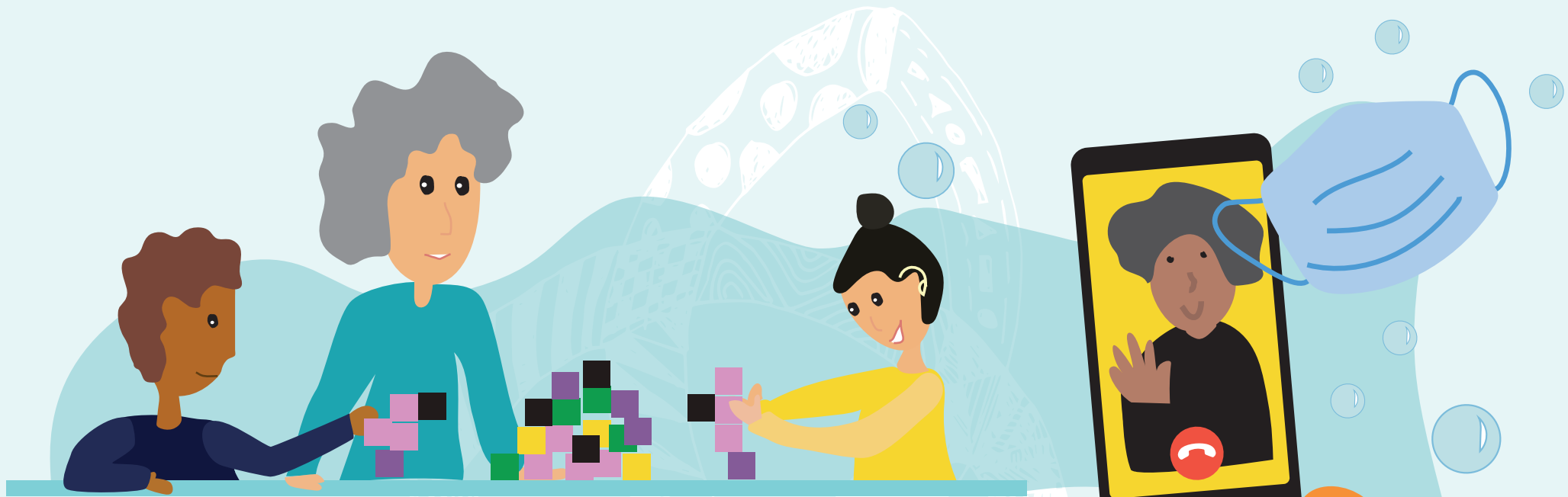
Return to face-to-face teaching

These challenges did not disappear with the reopening of schools to all students. Indeed, school staff reported anxiety among many students, parents and carers during the transition phases. The 'bubble' system introduced at the start of the 2020/21 academic year limited activity within schools and colleges, as it required groups of children (and staff) to be kept separate from each other. This restricted the wellbeing support that schools and colleges could provide through group work and the number of students counsellors could see, due to the need for extensive cleaning procedures. When a student or teacher within the 'bubble' tested positive for COVID-19, the group was required to return to remote teaching. Once the requirement for 'bubbles' was removed at the start of the 2021/22 academic year, the challenge of supporting individuals who were sent home to isolate continued. As not everyone was isolating at this time, feelings of isolation differed to those previously experienced. In addition, some students had less consistent attendance, potentially related to parental anxieties commonly reported during the pandemic. In this context, staff found it challenging to provide appropriate reassurance and support.

Pupil and student need

In the early stages of the pandemic, school staff expressed concern about the impact of the coronavirus and associated restrictions on child and youth mental health. However, they also recognised the potential benefits of staying home for some students who found the experience of being in school or college challenging. During later discussions, the benefits to students were no longer raised. A "substantial" increase in demand for pastoral and mental health services was reported by staff, who described being "overwhelmed" by the level of need. In particular, staff noted increases in anxiety and eating disorders among students.

As the pandemic has worn on and more students and staff have lost loved ones, supporting those who have been bereaved has become a specific challenge. Alongside this has been the challenge of providing reassurance to students against a backdrop of uncertainty around their education, frequently changing government guidance and parental anxiety. The volume of social media content and its contradictory messaging has exacerbated this uncertainty.

External sources of support

School and college staff had limited access to face-to-face appointments with professionals working in children and young people's mental health services (CAMHS) during the early part of the pandemic. They also reported higher thresholds and longer waiting lists for CAMHS and other external agencies as the pandemic has progressed. As a result, staff felt they were "holding" more students with greater mental health needs, and they have struggled to meet students' and parents' and carers' expectations of school or college support.

Staff wellbeing

Supporting staff wellbeing has been challenging during the coronavirus pandemic. School and college staff reported that many established wellbeing activities and opportunities for informal support have not been possible due to the restrictions, leading to a sense of isolation – arguably at a time when the support was most needed. Combined with their personal experiences of the pandemic, this has left some staff feeling exhausted.

Rising to these challenges: changes in mental health and wellbeing provision

School and college staff reported undertaking a broad spectrum of activity, at speed, in response to the change in need for mental health and wellbeing support.

Broadening and diversifying support

Overall, staff feel there has been an increase in the quantity of support made available to students. In the early stages of the pandemic, staff were informally 'checking-in' with students to assess their needs and offer support. Additional counselling and mentoring have been made available in many settings to cope with an increase in referrals. This support has often been targeted at those considered vulnerable or those experiencing bereavement (see Box 1). In some cases, additional staff have been employed to expand available support, including wellbeing practitioners, study support assistants and clinical staff. In one instance, the need for support from counsellors was considered so great that the school decided to allow class and year group bubbles to mix to optimise access to the counsellor.

Schools and colleges have expanded their provision of group work, in part because they have had insufficient capacity to deliver one-to-one provision for the number of students requiring support. These sessions have included an art nurture group and mindfulness groups in primary settings, and groups to tackle loneliness among college students (see Box 2). In some cases, students have been encouraged to attend group sessions rather than counselling in the first instance. The communal element of such work may help to tackle some of the key challenges that students face related to isolation. Some schools and colleges have developed new materials for use with students; these include short courses to tackle specific challenges such as loneliness, dealing with uncertainty, anxiety and coping with transitions. Some schools and colleges have also placed greater emphasis on self-help, and students and parents and carers have been signposted to a range of resources, often online (see Box 3).

Box 1: bereavement journals - Collyer's (college)

During the pandemic, staff witnessed increased feelings of loss and grief among students. These have been increasingly difficult to respond to as external services have been so stretched. One of the fears expressed around the time of grieving was a feeling of not being able to say goodbye to a loved one, including a fear of forgetting or the anguish of life carrying on around them as if it no longer mattered to others. Staff have worked with individuals in relation to a recent loss or, for some, the grief that has risen to the surface again after many years (one of the impacts of the pandemic). Students have been supported to create a journal of memories and a place to put all the unspoken final words. The journals vary in size and style, each one containing drawings, photographs, amusing stories and a farewell letter.

Box 2: connections - Collyer's (college)

This support was developed when trying to meet the needs of students during the pandemic. Restrictions meant that many were asked to leave college when lessons ended and to keep a safe distance from others – a recipe for social anxiety for some students. As part of the enrolment process, the college informed students about the opportunity to meet others in organised group sessions. In the early weeks of college, students were reminded by email and met in lunchtime groups. Staff supplied a printed list of questions to ease the awkwardness of simply talking and encouraged the use of Snapchat groups to increase contact. Promotion of this group highlighted the opportunity to meet new people with similar interests or to widen networks of acquaintances, rather than focussing on loneliness itself. This has made a difference to many of the students, enabling them to settle into college and create friendship groups. The structure and frequency of sessions was altered in response to feedback from students. Social isolation is a significant source of anxiety among this age group and even small initiatives can help.

Box 3: self-help resources - Dauntsey's (secondary school)

During the pandemic, this school has made extensive use of a paid-for online self-help resource. The site has content for staff, parents and carers and students. It includes a wellbeing hub that has a range of webinars, articles and podcasts offering advice and support. Within the student body, 20 wellbeing champions have been recruited to encourage peers to access the resources. Content from this online resource is also included in weekly parent and carer briefings and shared with tutors.

Wellbeing Champion

Online provision

At the start of the coronavirus pandemic, schools and colleges made a rapid transition to online working. This included the provision of mental health and wellbeing support. Some existing services were adapted to enable them to continue in a new format; for example, meditation classes and one-to-one support that had previously been delivered face-to-face were conducted remotely. Schools and colleges have also established new services, including a virtual wellbeing hub that has pre-recorded material alongside an online chat function and social groups to reduce isolation. Students have been strongly encouraged to join lessons and support sessions with their cameras on where possible, to try to enhance the feeling of community. Some schools have also embraced online mental health services, such as Kooth and Zumos, to increase their online provision.

Staff have spoken of challenges but also opportunities arising from this new way of working. All settings have continued with a mix of face-to-face and online resources and support, even when schools and colleges have been fully open. The developments that have been made in online provision have offered new ways of connecting with students and parents and carers. At the start of the pandemic, one of the main challenges staff described was feeling disconnected from their students. While face-to-face connection remains important for these settings, lessons learnt from the use of online approaches during this time may have benefits for communication in the future.

Curriculum changes

Schools and colleges have also reported changes to the curriculum since spring 2021, with an increased mental health focus in personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education in both primary and secondary settings. In one school, PSHE is now being delivered as a timetabled lesson, by trained teachers, rather than forming part of tutor time. There has also been an increased focus on mental health and wellbeing as part of the transition curriculum delivered in Years 6 and 7 to ease the move from primary to secondary education.

Staff training

Many staff have been offered additional training to improve the support they are able to offer their students. Educational psychologists have supported schools with this. One school has employed a mental health and wellbeing coordinator trained in Youth Mental Health First Aid to train the rest of the staff body. Other training has focussed on bereavement and emotion coaching to improve responses to traumatic experiences.

Staff wellbeing

In recognition of the pressures that staff are under, there have also been some changes to the way in which schools and colleges support staff wellbeing. During the first lockdown this included online support through virtual team meetings, wellbeing groups and meditation sessions. Care was also taken in planning staff rotas when schools and colleges were closed to most students, to avoid overwhelming staff. Schools and colleges have continued to emphasise staff wellbeing since face-to-face teaching for all students resumed, with ongoing signposting of support services, use of supervision and paid for, web-based wellbeing services.
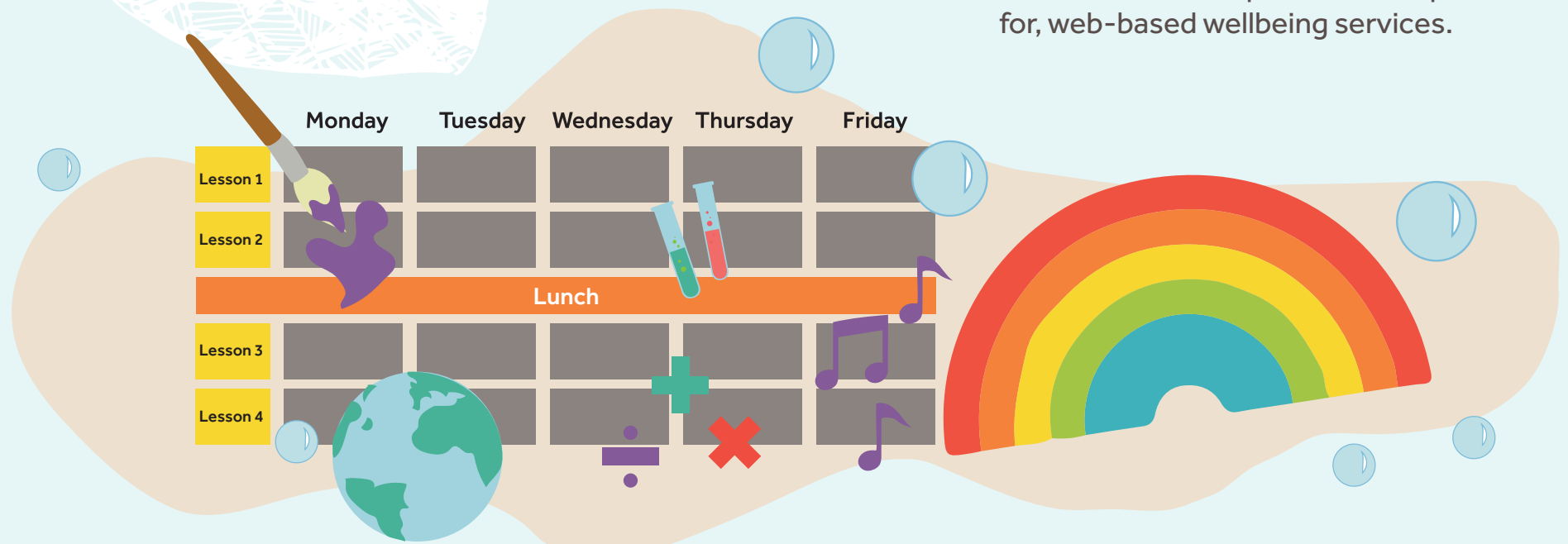
Communication with parents and carers

Settings have increased their communication with parents and carers during the pandemic, with many having made regular phone calls to students' families and additional home visits to those considered at greater risk of poor mental health. In addition, one school has hosted regular parent and carer wellbeing webinars (see Box 4). Other settings have used existing communication channels, such as regular bulletins, to highlight mental health and wellbeing.

Box 4: parent webinars - Abingdon School (secondary school)

In mid-2020, the school launched parental wellbeing webinars to cover a range of topics. These have been really well attended, perhaps because the pandemic thrust wellbeing into the spotlight as a key issue and possibly because it saves a commute to school on a mid-week evening for a meeting. The webinars have covered a broad range of topics that chime with the parent body. These have included 'navigating the teenage years', social media and sessions drawing on the expertise of NHS doctors, looking at aspects of relationships and sex education. Using Mentimeter has allowed the school to get instant feedback during the webinars and parents and carers have engaged well with this online tool. The feedback from parents and carers has been used to make adjustments and improvements for future webinars.
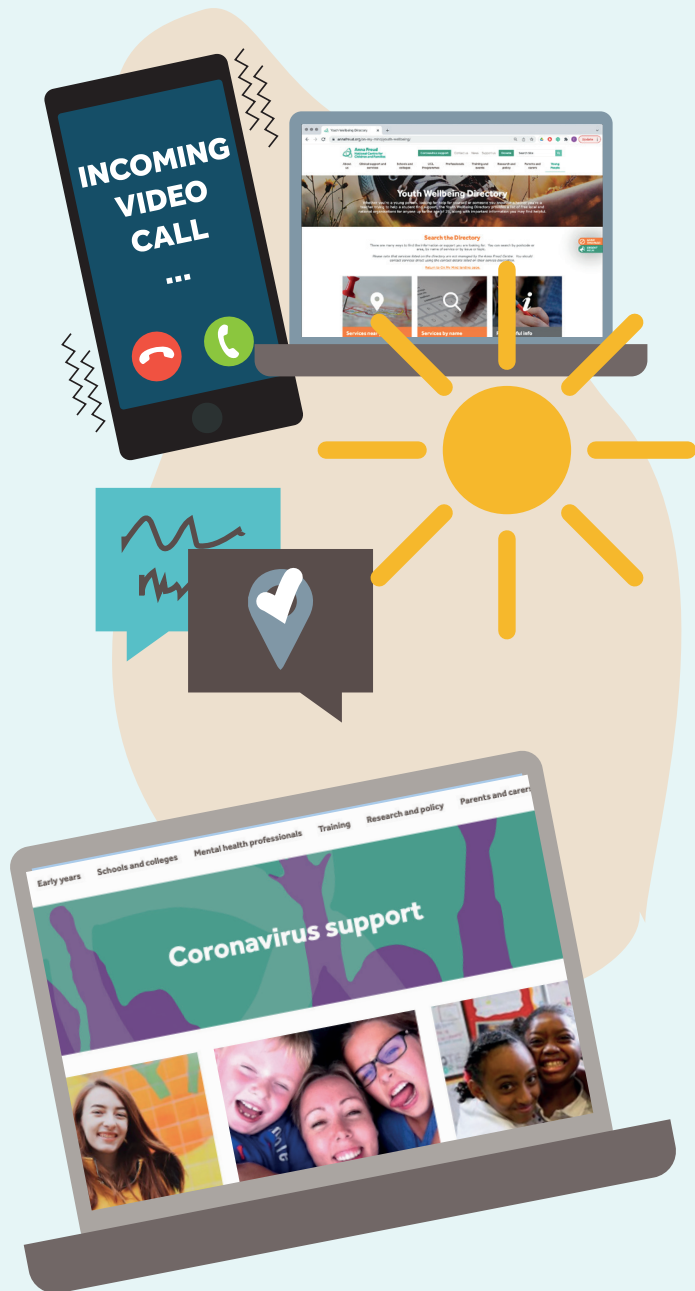
Moving forward

The schools and colleges we spoke with have made significant alterations and enhancements to their existing mental health and wellbeing provision. The level of need among the student population across settings remains high. School and college staff identified barriers to maintaining the mental health and wellbeing provision put in place during the earlier phases of the pandemic, including staff time and the cost implications of some of the approaches. However, for some settings, these changes have resulted in the adoption of a more comprehensive whole-school approach, accelerating planned changes and increasing the focus on mental health. If you are interested in improving the mental health support offered in your setting, consider the examples shared in the boxes, and the links in the resources section.

Resources

For self-help resources for young people visit:

annafreud.org/on-my-mind

For more information about the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on children and young people's mental health visit:

annafreud.org/coronavirus-support/our-research

For more information, advice and resources for schools visit:

mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk

annafreud.org/schools-and-colleges/5-steps-to-mental-health-and-wellbeing

For more information about Kooth visit: kooth.com

For more information about Zumos visit: zumos.co.uk

Reference to specific resources or services within this briefing is intended to illustrate some of the options available to schools and colleges. Inclusion does not imply endorsement by the Anna Freud Centre.

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About EBPU

The Evidence Based Practice Unit is a child and youth mental health research and innovation unit based at UCL Faculty of Brain Sciences and the Anna Freud Centre. Founded in 2006, this collaboration bridges cutting-edge research and innovative practice in children's mental health. We conduct research, develop tools, provide training, evaluate interventions and disseminate evidence across four themes:
Risk | Resilience | Change | Choice

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