

Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls and Serious Youth Violence through a 'whole school approach'



A report of the learning from Tender's work in four Croydon schools 2018-2020

Executive summary

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Schools have a significant role to play in preventing violence. A supportive school culture and skilled teachers can influence young people's values and help them develop the confidence needed to challenge violence and abuse when they encounter it. Schools can also forge alliances with parents and the wider community to help maintain a safe, non-violent environment in which children and young people can thrive and provide a counterpoint to social norms that accept or encourage abusive or aggressive behaviour.

This report summarises the learning from establishing, delivering and evaluating a whole school approach (WSA) to prevent violence against women and girls and serious youth violence in four schools in the London borough of Croydon. It brings findings from the evaluation together with evidence from the wider field of prevention work in order to identify implications for other WSA initiatives.

The whole school approach project in Croydon

Tender, an arts-based and educational organisation working to end domestic abuse and sexual violence, led the three-year project in Croydon. Funded by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC), the project was delivered in three primary schools and one secondary school. The project ran from January 2018 to July 2020 and was evaluated by DMSS Research.

Tender used a 'hub and spoke' delivery model in Croydon, with two dedicated WSA workers and a number of freelance workshop facilitators delivering the majority of direct work with students and staff in years 6 – 10. The project engaged over 1,400 students in regular Tender workshops across the three years. Student workshops used age-appropriate language, games and drama-based activities to address issues such as gender stereotypes, diversity and healthy relationships. Older students also learnt about victim blaming, sexual cyber bullying and consent.

A 'whole school approach'

A whole school approach is based on the premise that because the causes and consequences of violence against women and girls are multi-faceted, strategies to prevent violence also need to address multiple factors in a co-ordinated way. A whole school approach means taking account of how all those involved with the school can play a role in preventing violence and how all aspects of school life can make a contribution.

The six building blocks of a whole school approach

This report highlights six building blocks identified as necessary to establish and embed a whole school approach to prevent gender-based violence. The first three building blocks (1 – 3) form the foundation on which a whole school approach needs to rest. However, as a whole school approach is a collective, holistic and continuous process, multiple strands of work involving different stakeholders need to take place concurrently to ensure that key messages are embedded in all aspects of school culture.

Building block 1: Establishing school ownership and leadership

School ownership of a WSA is crucial for it to be effective and facilitate systemic change. To **establish ownership** and ongoing commitment by school leaders, the project team, whether internal or external, needs to carry out a significant amount of preparatory work with school leaders, governors and staff. While ongoing and committed **leadership is key to ownership**, project learning also highlights that **knowledge is key to ownership**. Hence, schools need to carry out assessments of their strengths and weaknesses, and agree goals and milestones for the WSA that reflect their starting point and local context.

The experience of this project emphasised that **establishing ownership takes time** and that for outside agencies the optimal time to fully develop a WSA partnership is three years or longer. To facilitate school change through a WSA, it must regularly **touch and involve everyone** so that core messages are communicated – either through direct or indirect work.

Building block 2: Building a strong delivery team

As a WSA works with multiple groups, including children, staff, school leaders, parents, governors and other community organisations, and operates at different levels, it requires a project team with access to **diverse skills and experiences**. **The diversity of a staff team** and the match between the communities and cultures of children and workers can also bring real strength to a project. Well considered changes to staff recruitment enabled Tender to diversify its staff team.

Delivering at a distance is often an organisational challenge, as physical and social distance can influence the resources and support available to staff based remotely, and the ability of managers to effectively steer a project. Hence, partner organisations using a hub and spoke delivery model need to plan how best to minimise this.

Building block 3: Raising awareness, skills and confidence among school staff

Staff play a pivotal role in establishing and maintaining a positive school culture that promotes equality and respect. It is therefore critical that school staff are supported to increase their own awareness, confidence and skills through **high quality staff training** with a clear purpose. **The content of training** needs to be appropriate to the outcomes of the WSA, as well as allow school staff to build ownership of the project.

As **staff changes** are common in most schools, especially in larger secondary schools, staff awareness training is best built into the induction of new staff, with a rolling programme of refresher sessions. However, staff development can be achieved by a variety of means, and awareness and skills can be developed without attending training courses. Hence, where a WSA struggles to engage school staff, **training is not the only option** to raise awareness, confidence and skills.

Building block 4: Working with children and young people

The Croydon project showed the value of working with primary school children when addressing gender-based violence, as well as older children and young people in secondary school. **Prevention work with younger age groups** can help address issues before social norms and gender stereotypes become established. When working directly with children and young people, **the use of creative methods** such as drama and role play offer young participants the opportunities to practice skills and apply learning to real life scenarios. In addition, **a confidential and safe space where young people feel comfortable to talk** is paramount for any project working within a school environment.

Strategies to grow the active involvement and ownership of violence prevention messages through **co-production with children and young people** should form a central plank of any whole-school approach. The WSA in Croydon also undertook **targeted work with vulnerable children** which enabled schools to offer support to children and young people who were perceived as potentially vulnerable to abuse or involvement in violence.

Building block 5: Developing a positive school culture

Schools are complicated institutions and each school is distinct in its own right. **A regular presence in schools** is therefore essential, in part because schools often have a strong culture of in-person communication, but also to help **build relationships with key staff in schools**. Such relationships are essential to the effective management and impact of a WSA project.

While direct work with students and staff are a crucial feature of any WSA project, **prevention messages** should be reinforced through a variety of means. Policies and procedures, PSHE curriculum, pastoral support, assemblies, parental newsletters and information boards can all reinforce a school's commitment to ending violence against women and girls, and its contribution to a positive culture of gender equality and anti-violence.

Building block 6: Involving parents and the wider community

Parents are often the most challenging group for school-based projects to engage. The WSA project in Croydon benefited from **utilising the schools' existing structures for engagement**, like parents' evenings and children's performances.

Violence and abuse affects parents too and a whole school approach should keep in mind that some parents are liable to themselves be survivors, victims or perpetrators. By **thinking 'whole family' as well as 'whole school'**, a WSA project can **build positive relationships with parents and carers** and extend its reach into the wider community.

Conclusion

The learning report emphasises the importance of building a foundation of school leadership and staff ownership to enable schools, with the support of a skilled WSA team, to engage all stakeholders and to build a positive school culture of gender equality and anti-violence.

Taken together the building blocks illustrate the importance of developing a whole school approach that is collective, holistic and continuous with multiple strands of work involving different stakeholders taking place concurrently to ensure that key messages are embedded in all aspects of the school culture. By bringing findings from the evaluation together with evidence from the wider field of prevention work this report has also highlighted some of the specific implications that future projects may want to consider when developing a whole school approach initiative.