



Greenacre pupils with their mentors

Who says we can't be peer mentors?

Schemes such as buddying, peer monitoring and mentoring are taking off in schools up and down the country. Cath Mercer from the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation reports on the policies that sees self esteem and confidence increase in school children everywhere

The mentoring of children and young people has become an increasingly important feature of social policy in the UK. A recent pilot run by the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (MBF) involved more than 14,500 young people working to develop peer mentoring in schools as a means to tackle issues such as attainment, transition, bullying, behaviour, and attendance.

97 per cent of all participating schools reported improved pupil ability to cope with school life and 96 per cent reported improved pupil confidence. These figures clearly reflect what has become a remarkable story in schools throughout England, as thousands of

co-ordinators, teachers, peer mentors and mentees can now testify. Peer mentors in schools are providing a unique and vital level of support, helping their mentees improve their grades and their behaviour.

Greenacre School in Barnsley, South Yorkshire was one of the first special schools in the country to become involved with the pilot. Working closely with MBF Peer Mentoring Training Co-ordinator Paul Wainhouse, Jo Carr pioneered a scheme that was tailor-made for her own students - all of whom have special needs including some who use communication boards. Jo explains, "I modified the existing materials to make

them accessible to my students. I took sections of the pack and adapted them into 'symbols'. We trained up twelve Year 10 students and enabled them to organise games on the playground for Year 6 pupils to support them through transition into the secondary department. We decided against one-to-one Peer Mentor-Mentee relationships due to the needs of our young people and felt that a teamwork approach would be much more suitable, ensuring that pupils entering year 7 had at least one familiar face on the playground."

MBF Peer Mentoring Training Co-ordinator Paul Wainhouse has worked with hundreds of pupils across the

SEN spectrum. He says “just because a student/pupil is ‘statemented’ doesn’t mean that they don’t have skills and qualities to support and encourage another. By initiating a peer mentoring programme, you are creating a foundation upon which to build an ethos of support and nurturing. It is irrelevant whether the environment is mainstream or SEN, it’s about taking the processes and creating something unique to the environment. There are projects across England that see students with ASD, severe communication difficulties and Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) working as peer mentors. Discussing peer mentoring with those working in an SEN environment they are honest enough to admit that, sometimes you have to work hard with the peer mentor in order to remove issues from the previous day but, once done, they are just as effective as their mainstream counterparts.”

At the start of the academic year, Alison Hiscox, Advanced Skills Teacher at Bettridge School in Cheltenham set up her own peer mentoring programme. She explains, “Many of our pupils have severe learning difficulties. We’d heard how successful peer mentoring can be, so we wanted to set up our own scheme that would help our Year 6s through the transition into Year 7”. MBF training was given which included comprehensive resource packs with a step-by-step guide to setting up a programme from scratch as well as details of how pupils can work towards an ASDAN

Peer Mentoring Award. Following the training, the MBF also put Alison in touch with Jo Carr at Greenacre as the objectives and aims of both programmes were similar.

Alison explains: “Because of the abilities of our students, our programme may not always follow traditional routes, but we already have four fully-trained Year 11 peer mentors who work on a range of playground duties such as organising games and helping support staff and pupils.” She continues: “They have already organised a number of student-led activities in the secondary department to help our transition pupils acclimatise themselves to the secondary school environment.

“What’s been most lovely is watching how their self-esteem grows from being around older pupils in addition to the confidence the status of ‘Peer Mentor’ gives them. They all wear badges so everyone knows who they are (we use a smiley face as our badge instead of words, so that all our pupils could recognise the symbol).

“The support we’ve had from the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation has been invaluable – lots of practical support and immediate feedback to our questions. As Greenacre supported us, we’d be more than happy to talk to other schools who might be thinking of setting up a peer mentoring programme and to share our experiences and resources.”

Mr Wainhouse adds: ‘It can be very daunting setting up a brand new peer mentoring project regardless

of whether you have to start by adapting all the materials. The MBF encourages schools to meet to share their experiences and we host special networking events where coordinators can find help or support other schemes by sharing information, ideas and resources. These two schools provide a perfect example of how well this approach can work.”

There are currently twelve special schools taking part in the MBF’s National Peer Mentoring Anti Bullying Pilot – one of these is Pendle Community High School that is setting up a programme called ‘Equal Partners’ with the adjoining Pendle Vale College. The programme aims to help break down the barriers between the mainstream pupils and the special needs pupils.

The pilot is helping schools throughout England set up and sustain effective peer mentoring programmes that specifically support anti-bullying strategies and that link with other initiatives such as SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) and the Healthy Schools Programme. **S** For further details visit www.peermentoring.org.uk

The MBF is the national strategic body for those working in mentoring and befriending. It provides support for peer mentoring through a range of resources, qualifications, publications, networking and training events, and an interactive website at www.mandbf.org.uk