Low parental involvement: lack of interest, or confidence in the school?

They also thought that this information would be useful to themselves. 4. They thought that parents and schools had a joint responsibility for sex education, schools wanting the advantage with the more ‘biological’ aspects, morality and relationships being addressed at home.

Staff and sex education

1. Only one of the schools undertook formal pupil evaluation.
2. Anecdotal evidence indicated a need for monitoring and evaluating sex education programmes. This was perceived as very important for newly-qualified teachers or staff new to this area, as lack of criteria left them unclear about accessing resources and agencies.
3. Teachers did not perceive themselves to be in need of additional basic information, but expressed a wish to explore less conventional teaching methods. Theatre-in-education and similar initiatives were cited as a key area of interest.
4. Homosexuality and abortion were acknowledged as difficult topics, and staff were interested in strategies for addressing these areas.

Schools and parents

1. The data from the survey suggest a discrepancy between schools’ and parents’ perceptions of parental involvement. The parents in the study report a high degree of confidence in their school and cite that as a reason for not getting more involved. Conversely, the schools appear to want more parental involvement and perceive their detachment as lack of interest! 2. Several co-ordinators referred to the fact that they seem to hear from parents only when there is a problem. The mechanism for this is clearly defined in the school prospectus, but it is felt that there is little opportunity for staff to receive positive feedback from parents.

A co-ordinator commented: ‘It’s really difficult to get the parents into the school, much less become actively involved in anything.

Recommendations

Keeping parents informed

1. A timetable of topics to be sent to parents before the sex education programme begins.
2. A co-ordinator commented: One idea that did seem to work quite well was sending the parents a booklet covering the same topics as the school. The feedback was positive; we were told it helped to raise the issue in the home and make discussion easier.
3. Regular newsletters to parents, including information about the sex education programme.
4. Parents’ evenings on sex education, with the opportunity to view the materials and talk with the teacher, were felt to be a ‘good idea’, but with reservations about the attendance.

A co-ordinator commented: ‘We tried it once a couple of years ago but it was hardly worth doing, the people that did come didn’t really need the information, the ones that didn’t come are the people that would have benefited the most.

From regional data to nationwide statistics

To some extent any interpretation is difficult, whatever you find, because different parts of the country are represented in each annual sample. Locally, survey co-ordinators work hard on getting an appropriate selection of schools to participate; but if you discover a difference between successive years in a nationwide collection you cannot know if young people have changed throughout the country between successive years, or if they have always been different in the parts of the country represented in the successive surveys.

This is a particular difficulty for us, because there are no comparable attempts at national data collection for many of the items in our questionnaire to which we could refer for guidance. For example, while OFPCS measures children’s smoking, there is no national screening of their self-esteem, participation in athletics, or the type of breakfast they eat.

Consistency

One of the arguments that strengthens the case for comparing our data from different years is the consistency of the levels of certain behaviours reported across the years. This consistency suggests to us that for these items at least the percentages are probably representative of the nationwide picture. Moreover, if trends year-on-year can be seen in one behaviour, while others remain stable, then these probably are a reflection of a genuine nationwide trend.

If a difference is found between successive surveys in one district, it can be helpful to discover the same difference in other districts, and in the collection of all districts, surveyed in the same year.

We believe that we have just identified one such trend. In 1989 we looked at smoking and drinking over the five years from 1984 to 1988, published in Young People in 1988. Since then we have struggled to find the time to look at other behaviours and in other years, although a start was made when we published two volumes of our Young People into the Nineties series.

Although the interest and possibly the value of doing so is great, we have insufficient funds to support our research of the data base as well as provide the service we did — there are, after all, 11 years of data and hundreds of questions to examine.

Fewer drinkers in 1994?

However, any one behaviour doesn’t take too long to look at, and when this parliamentary researcher recently picked up Young People in 1994 and compared the tables in it with the trends shown in Young People in 1989 we were prompted to do so.

The proportion of young people reporting that they had drunk alcoholic drink during the week previous to the survey was fairly steady.
The percentage of boys (above) and girls (right) that recorded having had at least one alcoholic drink during the previous week, from the Unit's annual nationwide data.

The average number of alcohol units consumed during the previous week by boys (above) and girls (right) that recorded having had at least one alcoholic drink, from the Unit's annual nationwide data.

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