Rebecca came to St Albans School, Hertfordshire in 2009 as an English teacher having joined the teaching profession in 2008 after a brief spell working in the film industry. Since commencing her current role as Head of Middle School four years ago, Rebecca has established a holistic approach to pastoral care and developed an increasing interest in the wellbeing of both pupils and staff. As a culmination of her research and earlier initiatives, in September 2018 Rebecca launched MindEd, a campaign to tackle mental health stigma and promote positive wellbeing at St Albans School.

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Rebecca Baxter

MindEd : A whole-school strategy on wellbeing - Tackling mental health stigma and promoting positive wellbeing in secondary schools

Recent research into young people's mental health in the UK supports what teachers and pastoral leaders have been witnessing in schools over the past decade: an exponential rise in the rates of reported mental health disorders. According to NHS Digital, the prevalence of 5-15 year olds experiencing emotional disorders (including anxiety and depression) has increased by almost a third – from 3.9% in 2004 to 5.8% in 2017 - and one in eight children and young people aged between five and 19 has a diagnosable mental health condition (NHS Digital, 2017). Additionally, mental health services, such as CAMHS, are vastly overstretched, with waiting lists of up to a year (Moore & Gammie, 2018), and less than a quarter of young people with mental health needs accessing professional support. The demands on schools, therefore, to support these growing numbers of young people with poor mental health are increasing year on year. However, it is not enough to simply be reactive; schools and local authorities are becoming increasingly aware of the need for a far greater emphasis on proactive mental health and wellbeing education.

One way to be more proactive in tackling mental health concerns is through the taught curriculum. As long ago as in 2011, the Centre for Economic Performance published the results of a long-term study into evidence-based PSHE focusing primarily on the provision of a Personal Wellbeing programme of study and the effectiveness of this study is leading to the development of a model curriculum in this area (Hale, Coleman & Layardet, 2011). This is undoubtedly much needed, but, as the study acknowledges, schools also need to embed such programmes in their individual contexts and offer programmes such as these as just one part of a holistic whole school strategy if it is to really make a difference.

At St Albans School, we have been working during recent years to develop such a strategy and in September this year we launched MindEd, a programme designed to promote positive wellbeing and tackle mental health stigma amongst three core groups: pupils, staff and parents. We recognise that a triad approach is essential to ensure that every young person, and the support network around them, is resilient, equipped with healthy coping strategies, and knows how to access help when it is needed.

MindEd: Pupils

In establishing the programme, we began by considering the challenges facing young people, which are undoubtedly more complex than ever: the rise in social media has changed the face of communication; globalisation of university education and employment has increased competition and thus the pressure to achieve top examination results; and young people today are constantly bombarded with a stream of often anxiety-inducing news and information. Moreover, despite increased technological connectedness and vastly improved access to global opportunities, this generation of teenagers are less genuinely attached to others, less likely to

take risks and, crucially, less happy (Twenge, 2017).

One of the most powerful impacts of the MindEd programme is its pupil-driven aspect; giving young people ownership of the solutions empowers them to take risks, build personal connections, and puts them at the forefront of tackling the taboo that still surrounds mental health issues. This year, a group of students in the Upper Sixth led the MindEd pupil team, organising monthly events and activities to bring the school community together and build relationships between students in different year groups. They also developed resources which form prefects or form tutors could deliver to younger pupils in Years 7 – 11 and delivered assemblies to younger year groups on eating disorders, coping with exam stress, and social media. Running alongside this, a mentoring programme with a focus on pastoral support has been established. Hearing older students sharing their own experiences with stress, anxiety, depression and eating disorders has been very powerful in beginning to tackle stigma, developing peer support, and encouraging others to come forwards and ask for help. Moreover, the mentoring programme develops the wellbeing of those working as mentors as well as their mentees; helping others and building connections is proven to enhance wellbeing.

MindEd: Parents

It is important to acknowledge, however, that it is not only larger societal and technological changes that are affecting young people: parenting has changed too. According to Jean Twenge, so-called 'iGen' children are growing up "less likely to experience the freedom of being out of the house without their parents--those first tantalizing tastes of the independence of being an adult, those times when teens make their own decisions, good or bad" (Twenge, 2017), and this is resulting in the development of a generation for whom being outside of their 'safe-space' poses serious emotional risks which they are simply not prepared for. Over-parenting, it seems, leads to a too powerful desire for 'emotional safety' which can "include preventing bad experiences, sidestepping situations that might be uncomfortable, and avoiding people with ideas different from your own." (Twenge, 2017). When we combine this with the fact that,

for iGen, "the world is an inherently dangerous place because every social interaction carries the risk of being hurt" (Twenge, 2017), it is perhaps easy to see why today's young people are at risk of experiencing the greatest mental health crisis any generation has ever faced.

Parents, therefore, are absolutely key in improving wellbeing and tackling mental health stigma, yet often they are the hardest group to reach. However, through increasing the publicity of wellbeing events at school via the school website and social media, sending out termly PSHEE newsletters, and inviting parents in for talks from school staff and external speakers on important topics such as screen time, risk taking, and mental health, parents are enabled to understand more about the education their son or daughter is receiving about mental health and wellbeing at school and continue discussions at home about these issues. Additionally, we have developed a resource bank for parents giving them advice about how to support a son or daughter who may be struggling with a mental health disorder, helping to dispel myths around some mental health conditions and building their understanding of the issues their child may be facing. Moreover, we have developed materials which offer advice to parents on how to manage difficult aspects of adolescence, such as: sex and relationships; parties, drugs and alcohol; and social media. We have found that there is a real appetite for such advice and that parents feel more equipped to set clear boundaries whilst also having the confidence to allow their sons and daughters to experience some of the risks which are necessary for building resilience.

MindEd: Staff

Education, support and training is also crucial for staff, and it is not only pastoral leaders who need to be able to offer help; all school staff, including teachers, school nurses and special educational needs co-ordinators must be equipped to respond to the growing mental health needs of young people in their care. Training programmes such as Mental Health First Aid offer excellent one and two day courses for education professionals in supporting pupils at the point of initial need; like triage nurses in hospitals, staff are able to listen, assess, and refer pupils on to appropriate support, either in or out of school. However, the majority of the training

for staff at St Albans School has been delivered in house; 'Wellbeing Forums', which run once a month, enable staff to come together over breakfast to disseminate training on wellbeing and mental health which they have undertaken out of school or share their experiences of supporting pupils in different capacities. Having a range of staff talking and discussing ideas at these events builds an open conversation around mental health and develops staff confidence in addressing issues they may previously have been unfamiliar with. In addition, we have found staff to have been very open about their own experiences with mental ill health in these sessions, which has been revolutionary in reducing mental health stigma amongst the staff body also.

Furthermore, we recognise that workload pressures across the teaching profession are increasing and that as adults we often feel the same pressures with social media and technology that young people do. We believe, therefore, that schools need to prioritise staff wellbeing and help their teachers to manage external stressors as well as the peaks and troughs of the school year to prevent stress and burnout. Professional training in pastoral care and mental health has, therefore, been combined with opportunities for staff to improve their own wellbeing. Free yoga and mindfulness sessions are offered to staff, social activities, such as book clubs and sketch clubs, have been promoted more widely, a counsellor is available in school two days per week, and a more open environment for staff to share their own experiences with mental ill health has been created through the celebration of national events, such as Time to Talk Day, led by the charity *Mind*.

MindEd: The Future

Whilst this programme has undoubtedly been a transformative step for the School on our path towards building a community in which mental health is given parity of esteem with physical health, we recognise that there is still a long way to go. New challenges arise weekly and the rapidity with which the world young people are living in is changing can be almost impossible to keep up with. As educators, however, we have a responsibility to do all we can to avert the mental health crisis enveloping the nation. As we all know, young people are the future and if they are to build a world in which people are happier, it is up to us to give them the skills to do so.

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