**Queen Marys’ Grammar School (QMGS), Walsall**

**Addressing the issue of rising mental health problems in students (March 2019)**

Queen Mary’s Grammar School (QMGS) is an Ofsted outstanding selective boys’ school which is co-educational in the 6th form and has 1089 pupils on roll. It is in Walsall, an industrial town eight miles northwest of Birmingham. In 2018, QMGS became a founder member of the Mercian multi-academy trust along with four other Walsall schools, following single academy conversion in 2011. The four pillars of QMGS are ‘Academic in Purpose’, ‘International in Outlook’, ‘Generous in Approach’ and ‘Enterprising in Spirit’, and life at the school reflects these characteristics equally, along with adherence to the QMGS Pastoral Charter. Over 60% of the pupils are of Asian ethnic origin, and some travel to the school from as far afield as Derby, which is 36 miles away. The school motto is ‘Quas dederis solas semper habebis opes’: ‘It is what you give that you will keep as eternal riches’.

The then Deputy Head, Richard Langton, made it a whole-school priority in 2016 to address the issue of rising mental health problems. The issue was being reported more and more nationally, and our school was no exception, putting additional pressure on our hard-working pastoral team. Initially, Mr Langton formed a staff working party, who discussed ideas and visited other schools to see the work they were doing. Some of us had had experience of mental health problems within our own families driving us to action. Mr Langton also initiated a school-wide mental health survey to assess the level of need.

Since 2016 we have done a lot to implement a culture of student wellbeing:

* Held an annual Mental Health Week with a range of events, to coincide with Children’s Mental Health Week in February. In 2019, these events actually spanned a full fortnight.
* Incorporated mental health lessons into the Key Stage 3 PSHE Scheme of Work on neuroplasticity, gratitude, the ‘anti-depressant lifestyle’, mental health issues and bereavement, plus held workshops on Key Stage 4 PSHE ‘drop-down days’ and school-wide year assemblies and form periods on themes such as ‘happiness’
* Started sixth-form outreach work in primary schools (our ‘Change Your Mind’ programme), where Y12 plan and deliver mental health workshops to Y6 on the themes of ‘Transition’ and ‘Digital Detoxing’
* Appointed additional staff to the pastoral team: two pastoral assistants, an Assistant Head with responsibility for pupil wellbeing, an additional Key Stage 4 Head of Year and an additional Social, Emotional and Mental Health mentor
* Established a QMGS Wellbeing Group, which organises various projects and events, such as a mindful colouring club and a tea tasting club
* Established ‘Rainbow Soc’, our school’s LGBT group
* Removed end-of-year examinations for Years 7 & 8
* Established a Year 7 Nurture Group for those struggling with the transition to secondary school
* Introduced a Key Stage 3 optional extension work booklet and removed rigid homework timetables
* Invited in mental health organisations such as CAMHS and Time to Change train pupils on how to support friends with mental health problems, or to preserve their own mental health

One of the challenges is finding time within the curriculum to cover mental health fully, as it spans such a wide range of sub-topics. Mr Langton introduced fortnightly PSHE lessons to Year 8 so that all of Key Stage 3 now receive regular lessons from a specialist PSHE teacher and each year group has three mental health lessons in the Autumn term. Mental health is also covered through the Psychology, RPE and English curricula. Another challenge is making sure pupils realise that mental health education isn’t just for those already suffering - it is designed to give guidance not only on how to support others, but also on how to achieve optimum wellbeing in order to live ‘life to the full’, another of our school’s mottos. One of our challenges is getting pupils to realise that no-one can say with certainty they will never suffer from a mental health issue.

There is no doubt that three years since our work started, mental health awareness has been embedded as part of our school’s culture. Pupils are being given far more ideas now on how to look after their mental health; i.e. a preventative approach, rather than just reactive. There have been many ways in which staff wellbeing has also been attended to, from reducing the length of meetings and word counts for subject reports, to training from Time to Change and a mindfulness teacher. Measures introduced to help student wellbeing have had an inevitably positive effect on staff too, from an increased number of pastoral staff spreading workload, to a reduced number of end-of-year exams easing the amount of marking. As a school, we have had local and national attention for our work, which will feature in a chapter from Ross Morrison McGill’s new book, to be published this September.

Over the next 12 months, we aim to continue to grow our Wellbeing and LGBT groups, organising more projects and hopefully gaining new members. We aim to increase the amount of time given over to mental health education at Key Stage 4 and continue to offer our staff high-quality mental health CPD - many of our pastoral team are trained with Mental Health First Aid England - especially as our Pupil Admission Number will increase from September 2020. We need to also make sure that our current curriculum is compliant with next year’s compulsory Health Education guidance from the DfE.

My advice to your school if you are considering implementing a culture of student wellbeing is not to be under the impression that mental health education can be adequately covered by assemblies, or by non-specialist PSHE teachers. It needs curriculum time, and staff - notably, the Headteacher - passionate about the cause.