College pupils 'talk with their thumbs' and use text-based service to report bullies

Sir Jonathan North Community College (SJNCC) in Leicester is using Contact Group's Text Someone anti-bullying solution to encourage its students to report any incidents of bullying or anti-social behaviour via text or online, 24/7.

Having long taken a proactive approach to anti-bullying and discrimination issues, Sir Jonathan North Community College was among the very first in the area to sign up for Text Someone when offered the service by Leicester City Council three years ago. Since then it has proved its worth as a valuable weapon in the College's anti-bullying armoury.

Sir Jonathan North Community College is the only girls' state school in Leicester. With 1,118 pupils, aged 11-16, SJNCC is a larger than the average comprehensive and has three specialisms: visual arts, science and mathematics and applied learning. It serves a culturally and socially diverse community with around half the students White British and the majority from other ethnic origins being Asian Indian. Over 30 different languages are spoken and about a third of the students speak English as an additional language.

"We've got a very positive 'telling' culture here at College," said Jacky Mason, SJNCC's anti-bullying co-ordinator. "So our students are generally happy to come and speak to a member of staff if they have a problem. But there will always be someone who will prefer not to do that and will see the appeal of sending a text. So we wanted to add a text service to the various options we offer our students to make sure that we were covering all the angles."

Leicester City Council developed Text Someone in conjunction with software developer Contact Group and offers it to all the schools in the area. It allows pupils, or their parents, to report any incidents of bullying or anti-social behaviour by text message at any time of day or night and even during school holidays. The technology gives another option to pupils who are often not willing to speak face-to-face about bullying and prefer to 'talk with their thumbs'.

It also makes it easier for students to report incidences of bullying inside or outside the school gates.

The body of the message must start with the school's code number and should include all pertinent information the child wishes to impart in confidence at that stage. Once a text message is successfully sent, an automatic acknowledgement is received and the incident is dealt with as soon as possible.

The service came into its own for a SJNCC student who had a problem while travelling to school by bus. She sent a text reporting that she was being verbally bullied by some boys from a different school, travelling on the same bus. Jacky was able to deal with the situation by contacting staff at the boys' school.

"When I asked our student why she had sent a text she told me that it was an action she could take immediately," said Jacky. "It was almost as if she was sending a confirmation, because she also said that she thought I would already know because there were adults on the bus who she imagined would have already told me. That one incident alone convinced me of the value of the service as a back up to our whole effort."

According to an NSPCC survey 16,493 young people aged 11-15 (4.4%) are frequently absent from state school or home educated due to bullying. 28% of children did not tell anyone about the abuse. The children's charity Childline said it had seen an increase in reports of bullying in the East Midlands, with 73 children mentioning self-harm and 68 mentioning suicide during bullying counselling sessions in Nottingham in the past year.

"The idea for Text Someone came from a steering group discussion on how to encourage children to report bullying," explained Dr Joe Dawson, Principal Educational Psychologist at Leicester City Council, who developed the service with Contact Group. "They recommended the use of technology that young people favour, such as texting and emailing, to encourage young people to report incidents of bullying.

 "Communication is important as we can't read the minds of students," said Joe. "One of the main difficulties that schools face is reluctance from young people to report bullying face-to-face or in school. So providing them with a way of telling someone when they are away from school or at home is important and this technology is now making it easier for young people to report bullying from the safety of their home."

Schools have found that they have been increasingly involved in solving problems that have happened outside of the school gates as well as inside. The technology is also picking up incidences of bullying that would otherwise have gone unnoticed.

"We publicise the service all over the school," said Jacky. "We talk about it in assemblies, there are posters in every tutor group, cards which are given to students and inserts for their planners. It's also mentioned in newsletters which go home to parents and carers to remind them that they can also use the text service to report any concerns.

"We know that bullying happens, that it is more likely to be a worry to younger students, and that it can damage self-esteem and confidence. Our policy encourages students to report concerns about bullying and emphasises that the College will take these reports seriously, follow them up, and keep parents informed of action taken.

"Text Someone is a really useful addition to the 'tool-kit' we have to deal with any problems and I value it enormously."