

Disability Harassment Report

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents over 16,000 members of the leadership teams of maintained and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. This places the association in a unique position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of both secondary schools and colleges.
- 2 The range of appalling cases collected by the EHRC survey indicate how serious the problem is; it is impossible not to sympathise with the plight of disabled people having to cope with such hostility as well as with their disability or disabilities. It also shows how difficult the context is in which schools, colleges and other agencies attempting to promulgate fairness, integration, inclusion and a celebration of diversity have to work.
- 3 ASCL wholly endorses the broad principles that are outlined in the recommendations. Members recognise their responsibilities in building a more inclusive future for all, and schools and colleges are deeply moral institutions that promote a culture of empathy with and respect for others.
- 4 ASCL recognises, however, that in practice the different kinds of disability do present different challenges in education, particularly at secondary schools. (The college situation is similar, but in general better in this respect because of the greater maturity of the student body.) Physical disabilities may need the commitment of major resources to enable young people to participate on an equal basis in a mainstream school. While increasingly it is possible to ensure young people fully participate in desk-based subjects and science, there are considerable difficulties in physical education, if the opportunities for children without disabilities are not to be limited.
- 5 Similarly, disabilities that can lead to disruption of classes are extremely difficult to accommodate in a context of ever-increasing demands for improved behaviour and performance from all children.
- 6 In both those cases a perception that disabled children are 'spoiling it for others' or have been accorded a privileged status is a powerful source of dislike and resentment which may then lead to harassment. Young people at this age mostly pass through a difficult stage of establishing their own identity and a

proportion fall into the error of bolstering their own self-esteem by denigrating and even harassing others. This has always been the case, disabled people are by no means the only ones to suffer from it, and schools have long established ways of bringing young people through to a more considered and more moral position, and limiting the damage that they can do in the meantime. The process is necessarily imperfect and partial, however: schools have limited capacity to shape attitudes, when teenagers are notoriously resistant to being told what to think, and when they spend most of their lives in social contexts that may not be as positive; and schools have even less power to control behaviour when pupils are out of sight of staff.

- 7 This is not to endorse a counsel of despair. Schools and colleges must continue to live up to their responsibilities, and the report acts as a reminder, if one were needed, that this is a process and not a simple recipe to be easily applied.
- 8 While recognising the responsibility of schools for helping to form attitudes and to deal with harassment within schools; ASCL does not support the extension of the school's role to the community policing of young people; dealing with any and every act of misbehaviour whether in school or out of it. The report stresses in its account of several unpleasant incidents that the perpetrators were "schoolchildren", when they were groups of children in public places or on public transport well away from whatever school(s) they attended. ASCL supports members who act to deal with cyber-bullying where it continues into school but it is unrealistic and unreasonable for schools to be expected to substitute for the police where crimes are committed in the community.
- 9 In practice a 236 page report will not be read by many in the education world; whilst almost all are sympathetic, this is only one of a great many issues that they have to consider, and they are under unprecedented pressure to improve performance in examinations. The commission should therefore consider issuing a set of short awareness-raising documents targeted at various sectors, of which education should be one (or, depending on the precision of the targeting, more than one).
- 10 I hope that this is of value to your consultation, ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

Martin Ward
Public Affairs Director
Association of School and College Leaders
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