

Behaviour Insights Report

Applying a relational practice lens to behaviour in further education

November 2025

Foreword



As Chair of NAMSS, I am delighted to introduce the second edition of our Behaviour Insights Report. Building on the foundations laid last year, this report continues to provide valuable evidence and practical strategies to support student success across the sector. It also serves an important insights into some of the challenges being navigated across the further education and training landscape, which I hope will help to inform and influence policy makers and leaders, as we continue to spotlight the vital work undertaken by a breadth of student services practitioners within the sector.

The past year has brought new challenges and opportunities, and our collective commitment to understanding behaviour remains as strong as ever. By sharing insights and best practice, we aim to empower colleagues to make informed decisions that enhance the student experience and foster positive outcomes.

In response to these findings, NAMSS has again partnered with behaviour expert Paul Dix and his team at When The Adults Change to explore how relational practice can be harnessed to foster trust, empathy, and high standards within college communities. This collaboration has resulted in a set of actionable insights and recommendations designed to support colleges in embedding relational practices into their culture and policies.

I would like to thank everyone who contributed to this year's report. Your expertise and dedication ensure that NAMSS remains at the forefront of promoting effective approaches to student engagement and wellbeing. Together, we can continue to shape environments where every learner has the opportunity to belong, thrive and achieve.

Lisa Humphries
Chair

Executive Summary

In March 2025, we surveyed our membership, seeking to understand their experiences of learner engagement, participation and behaviour in a post-pandemic world. This is the second year that NAMSS have delivered this survey and where relevant, data within this report has been shown as a comparison against the previous years data, although it should be noted that the total number of respondents increased this year versus the previous year.

72 member colleges from across post-16 providers in the UK responded to the survey, providing insights into the types of change they are experiencing, along with their response. This was an increase of 9 colleges responding and providing insight on the previous year's survey.

Overwhelmingly, members told us again that social media, closely followed by the cost-of-living crisis were the biggest attributing factors to student disaffection in colleges. When reviewing responses linked to social media, these featured challenges including misogyny and distorted perceptions and influences. These factors were closely followed by challenges resulting from family breakdown and the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic. These remain the top challenges when comparing responses to the 2023 data capture.

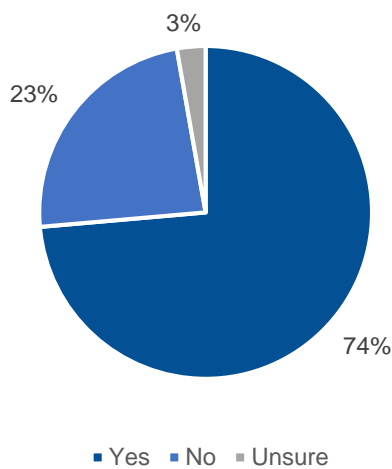
At the time of surveying, political disillusionment increased versus the previous year, as a growing area of concern around the disaffection of students, likely attributed to various world events, including war, the US and the UK Government response to various policy changes.

We know that for many students, colleges provide a place of safety, refuge and sanctuary, where they are able to connect with friends, maintain elements of routine and even forge relationships with key staff members.

In response to our survey results, this year, we have partnered with behaviour expert Paul Dix and his team at [When The Adults Change](#) again, to reflect on how, as student support services in colleges, we can play a pivotal role in harnessing relational practice, nurturing and developing deep trust, empathy and high standards. This report provides important insights and advice to support organisations in rooting this approach into their practice, policies and culture, fostering mutual respect, belonging and human kindness across our college communities and beyond.

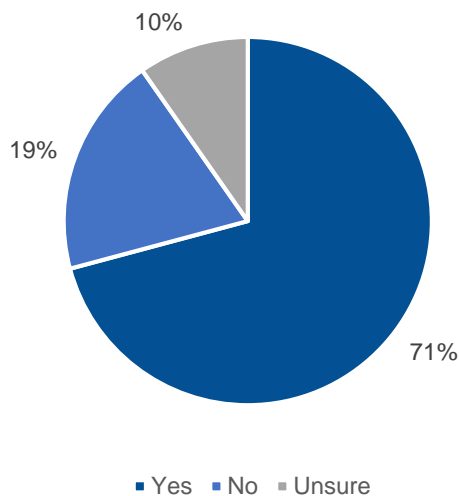
Data Insights

Did you feel general disaffection with wider society amongst students in your college worsened in the calendar year 2024 compared with in previous years?



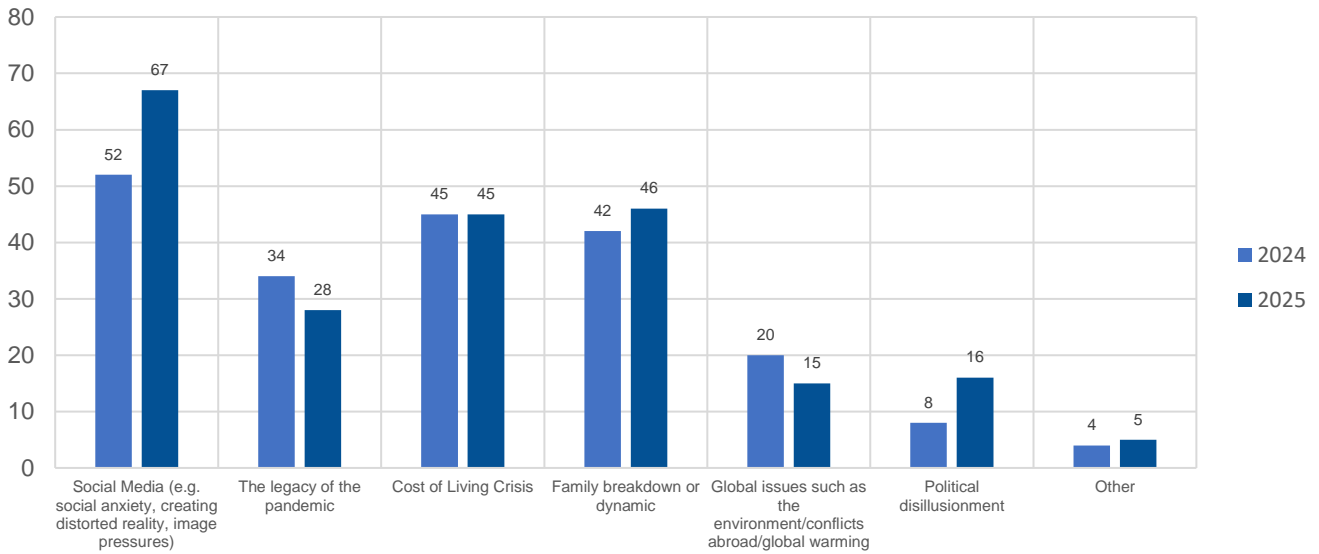
Whilst the total number of respondents increased for the 2024 survey, members indicating that disaffection had got worse decreased by 4% against the previous year.

Is this disaffection contributing to an increase in challenging behaviour of students in college?

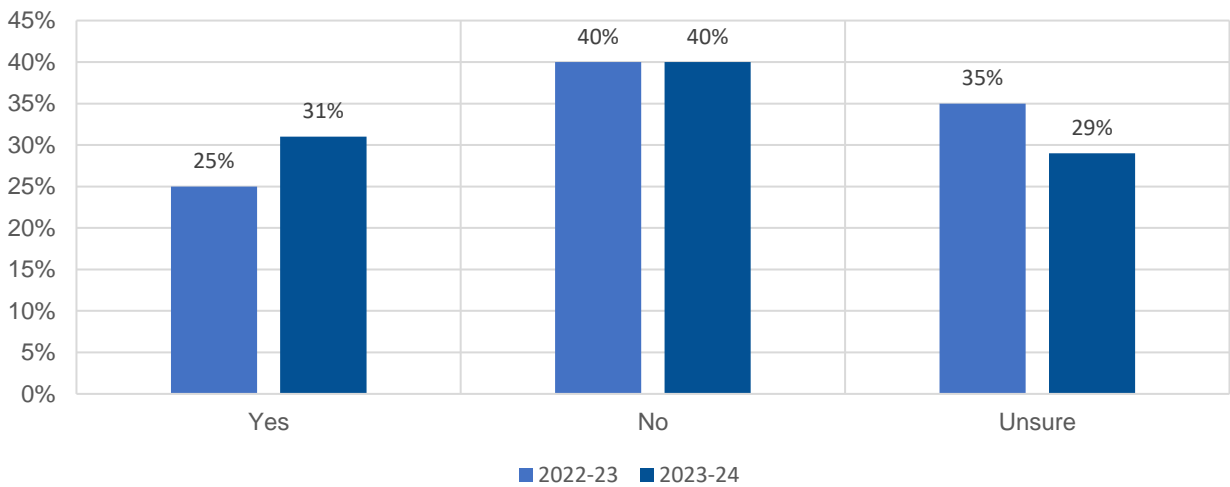


Those indicating that disaffection had contributed to increased challenging behaviour of students in college remained the same in 2024 responses as 2023.

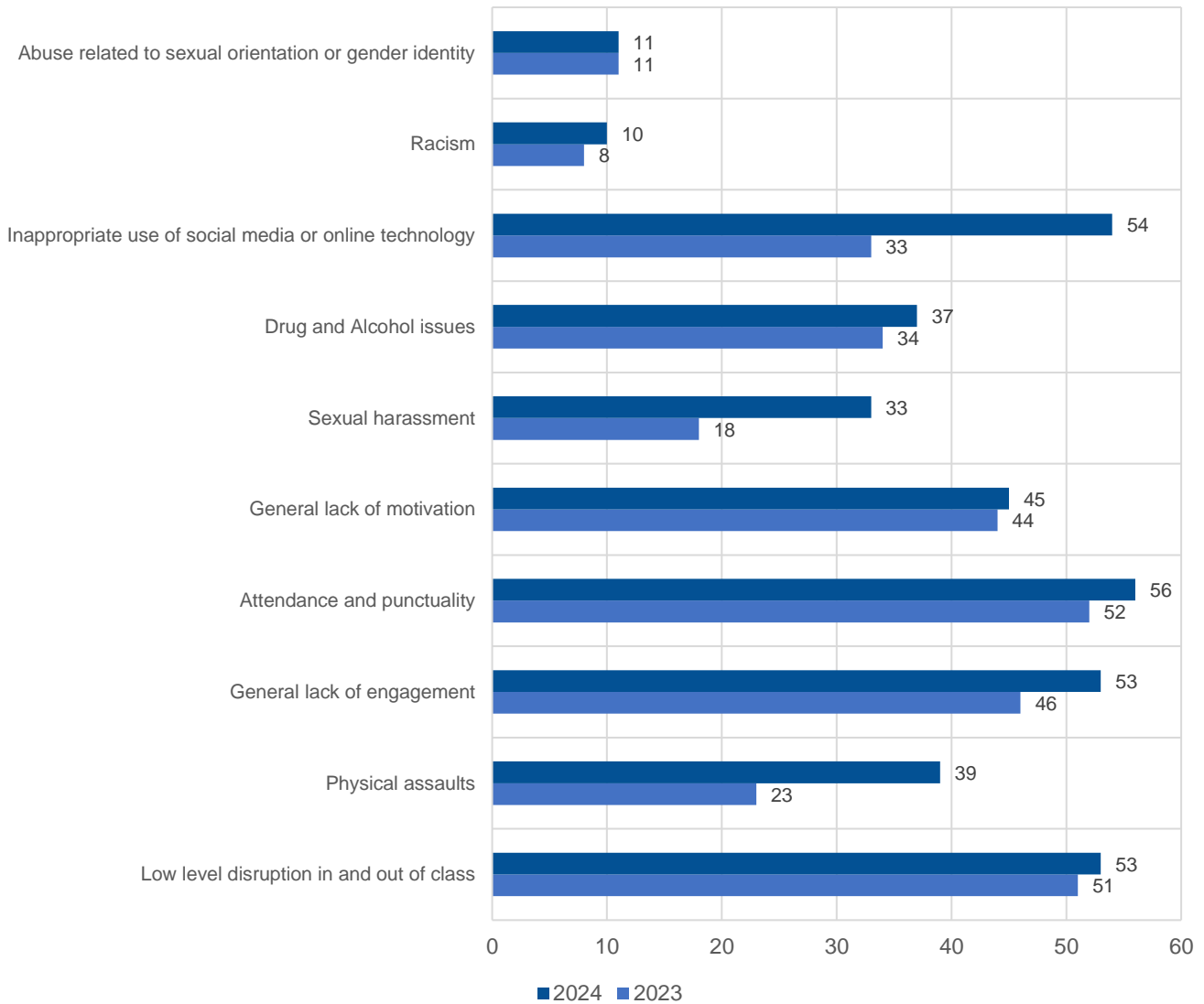
What have the main sources of disaffection amongst students in your college been over the last calendar year?



To your knowledge, did your college permanently exclude more students in the whole of 2024 than it did in 2023?



What kinds of challenging behaviour have you most seen increase in your college over the last calendar year?

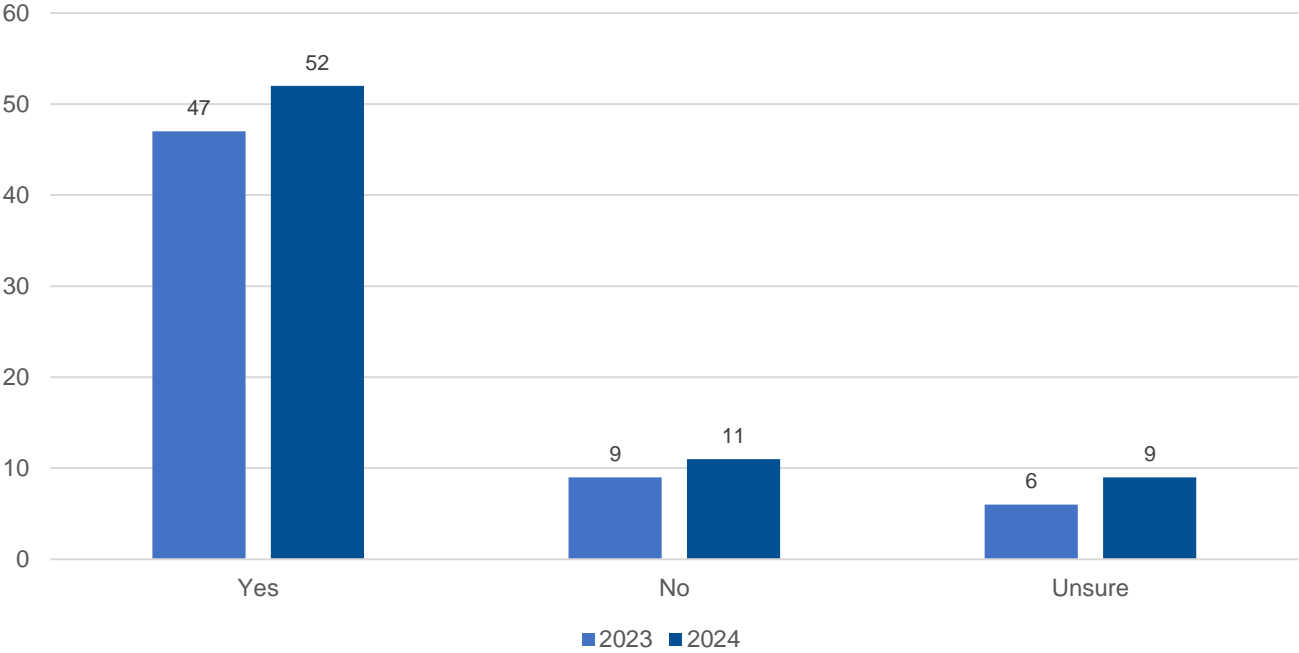


The greatest increases in issues in 2024 survey responses was the inappropriate use of social media and online technology (+64%), with specific challenges attributed to deep fakes, mi-information and artificial intelligence.

The second largest increase in specific issued from the 2023 to 2024 survey was physical assault, at 70%.

It is important to note that respondents were able to select multiple issues and the respondent rate to the 2024 survey was +14% on the 2023 response rate.

Do you feel that your college is seeing an increase in behavioural problems among college students who have missed a large amount of time in school?



What steps has your college taken to impact the instances of challenging behaviour? (text base response)

- Our pastoral team is taking a hard line on unacceptable behaviour.
- We are looking at a security presence on campus due to non or excluded students being smuggled onto campus by peers.
- Reviewed the 'Behaviour & Discipline' policy using a trauma-informed approach and launched the Learner Relationship & Support (LRS) policy and procedure. Held LRS forums at each campus to discuss case studies with a broad range of staff - what went well, what needs improvement etc. Increased employment of pastoral coaches to engage and support vulnerable learners. Delivered staff training in LRS approach. Implemented Team Around the Learner meetings to discuss potential causes of challenging behaviour, identify barriers and provide support. We are focussing on how we improve our learners' feeling of belonging.
- More training for staff, particularly where these issues are related to SEND, or students with EHCPs (where we are seeing a change in the kind of issues we are seeing). Increased capacity in SEND and wellbeing teams, and spaces for deescalating behaviour etc.
- Increased Security.
- Closer working with Police and Schools.
- Created and developed a Positive Student Behaviour Policy and cross college training.
- Trained security staff.
- Been consistent in the application of sanctions.
- Referral meetings to re-engage learners.
- Promoting positive behaviours through positive consistent challenge.
- Reinforcing clear expectations.
- Linking expectations to industry expectations.
- More staff presence and monitoring of areas.
- Following our behaviour support policy with the aim to educate and reengage.
- A more consistent approach from all staff.
- More visible manager presence at peak times.
- Increase of Student Safety Officers.

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- Clear expectations on behaviour at the start of term, with boundaries and a consistent approach from teaching staff.
 - All new staff receive a behaviour and trauma informed approach session from student safety staff in their induction.
 - Music playing in corridors and social spaces, refectories.
 - Close canteens and refectories during class time.
 - Earlier contact of parents/carers with both absence and behaviour issues.
 - When there are behaviour incidents, we have introduced a new procedure which is clear, has accountabilities and is much quicker than previously.
 - We looked at language used in our policy and procedure, removed disciplinary, removed sanctions, warnings e.g. verbal, written etc and introduced a supportive but clear procedure.
 - Review of Student Positive Behaviour Policy.
 - Restorative approach.
 - Trauma informed practice.
 - Higher level disciplinary being a 'hearing' forum rather than a disciplinary meeting.
 - A more restorative behaviour policy promoting positive behaviours, staff training and raising awareness of how to deal with conflict.
 - Introduced inclusion panels on each campus. Reviewing our Behaviour Policy to be more trauma-informed.
 - Introduced Security on 1 x main campus
 - Hiring security, a duty team to respond to incidents.
 - Introduction of YLM's and other Youth Intervention programmes.
 - Refined the behaviour policy.
 - Revisited the student charter.
 - Staff presence in particular areas during lunchtimes.
 - Reviewed the student code of conduct and disciplinary process.
 - Employed extra staff on a trial to see if the interactions have a positive impact.

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- Engagement strategies include use of motivational language. This includes moving towards a positive behaviour Policy. Training for staff of strategies to deal with challenging behaviour.
 - Higher management team presence at the start, lunch and end of the day particularly in our coffee shop area, respect/behaviour covered in tutorial.
 - Focus on proactive, positive strategies such as: attendance reward strategy, engaging external speakers, establishing clear expectations, positive behaviour policy/support with restorative practice, positive behaviour celebrated, adopting a multi agency approach, de-escalation training for staff along with safeguarding and inclusive practice, student voice and engagement
 - Re-written behaviour policy to include trauma informed practice approaches, increased training with staff of the importance and approach of pre-emptive 1:1's and actions to support behaviour and understanding of actions an impact.
 - Reinforcing college rules, increased contact with next of kin, increased manager presence at lunch and break times around communal areas, greater focus on student engagement (celebrating success), promoting student roles (student ambassadors).
 - Provide clear boundaries and expectations over the induction period, staged approach when managing challenging behaviour, allowing students to alter their behaviour and continue their education where possible, raise matters in personal development time to provide knowledge on acceptable behaviours and how behaviours impact them in the community, provide talks from external speakers to further educate learners, provide support from a wellbeing team, providing an outlet for learners to raise matters in a safe space and talk about strategies and interventions for support, provide clubs and societies to try and engage learners further in the college community.
 - Introduction of a new learner relationship strategy.
 - Introduction of MyConcern.
 - Trauma informed approach training for all staff, changes to policies - disciplinary to positive behaviour, language changes.
 - Extra training, more supportive interventions. Ensuring next of kin are always informed. Opened a Parent Portal so parents can see attendance too.
 - We have engaged with parents much earlier in the process than we normally would so that they are on board. A lot of conversations with parents and students are based on the impact of the student's actions whether that's on another student or a teacher. This is then followed up with an apology whether in person or written. We're considering adopting a "no phones" in classrooms next year.
 - We continue to embed a relational practice approach, working with staff to understand the importance of relationships and respect. This same message is cascaded to students, through student assemblies, our approach to managing behaviour and having a

consistent approach. Increasingly, feedback from students is that peers can sometimes seemingly continue to cause disruption or be inappropriate without any recourse. In response, we are working with a number of students to develop a short programme, similar to a speed awareness course, but for behaviour, where a student would have to engage in a programme before being reintroduced onto their timetable.

- Reviewed our positive behaviour and engagement policy with involvement of students.
- Trained staff on de-escalation strategies, trauma awareness, ACES.
- We have implemented team teach, de-escalation training, pathological demand avoidance training, increased management walk rounds, increased campus support presence, actively managing internal truancy.
- Offered a range of support options for students to know they have a safe space in which they can speak about any issues. Held a number of events with both internal departments and external organisations that offered advice, guidance and signposting on a wide range of topics.
- We have employed extra staff to help manage student behaviour and tried to keep spaces open longer so students have somewhere to go.
- Greater partnership working with police and mental health services. Focused training for staff particularly around trauma informed approaches. Reinforcement of key policies in particular behaviour policy and fitness to study.
- Diversifying roles and responsibilities, a reframing of our behaviour policy and procedures, retraining staff in the aforementioned areas.
- Resilience training for all students, a robust induction period, a behaviour support program including clear action plans and an attempt at working with parents/carers more.
- We have engaged more external speakers to help share key messages around misogyny, the impact of violence and harmful sexual behaviour. We are spending more and more time on restorative justice between students, we've increased (at great cost) our counselling service. We're also investing in a wider enrichment programme for our students.
- New SEMH Hub introduced, more external support, change in policies.
- Very specific focus on topics during weekly Skills for Life' lessons such as social media use, sexual harassment, staying safe.
- We have introduced a new mentoring project which focuses on students that have been identified as at risk of failing due to poor behaviour, attendance and engagement. part of the role will walk student to their lessons, especially maths and English.

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- Increased investment in mental health & wellbeing support. Increased supervision during lunch times. Increased security presence on campus. About to introduce use of security wands in response to unconfirmed reports of students carrying knives.
 - CAMHS on site, increased mental health support services. Stronger interaction with police and wider services. Big push on attendance. More knife and drugs searches to raise communication on colleges no tolerance and to keep all other students safe.
 - Addressing issues early on. Giving students the chance to redeem their actions to be more positive. Empowering staff to challenge behaviour in a respectful way for a positive outcome.
 - Recruited 2 specialist L&B staff and invested in training to support them and other key staff. Specialist Team Leader on behaviour change. Policies, procedures, and guidance are being updated to reflect these issues.
 - More wellbeing activities, tightening of attendance and behaviour monitoring, better security, liaison with our local authority violence reduction team. The recent disbanding of Schools Safety Officers by the Metropolitan Police has had a negative impact on all the work we are putting in and made the management of the most challenging students even more difficult.

Other Comments (verbatim)

- Staff need more support to deal and diffuse unacceptable behaviour across the organisation. It's everybody's responsibility. The Government needs to deal with this on a national level as it's becoming an absolute crisis.
- Some staff are struggling to embrace a person-centred, trauma-informed approach, others are feeling unsafe in college due to learners' behaviour that they find challenging. In a minority of areas this is leading to a widening gap between learners and staff and a breakdown in relationships that is difficult to solve in the short-term. Staff in this category tend to be more vocal than the majority and would like to see the college take a firmer, authoritarian approach that includes excluding learners ('zero tolerance'). There is a repeated narrative that 'learners are out of control and staff feel unsafe' that is not based on fact but is causing staff to feel unsafe. It is likely that learners are unsettled when taught by staff with this view, leading to anxiety, that leads to behaviours staff find challenging - and so the cycle continues. This is the minority, however; the majority of our staff develop good relationships with learners and the majority of our learners behave extremely well the majority of the time.
- I am concerned about what appears to be a more divided student community, with more open expression of sometimes provocative views around gender (particularly misogynistic comments about women), homophobia and more micro-aggressions around race.
- I have found parent engagement at an all time low this year, parents do not want to attend meetings or even receive phone calls calling their young person (16-17 years) old enough to look after themselves!
- English and Maths are the biggest reason for in college truanting. Students often supported by parents just 'giving up college/course, general apathy. Parents enabling decision. Much more use of 'anxiety/panic attacks' with no diagnosis. Low-mood prevalent in counselling referrals. The impact of having to be in Education, many don't want to be at college but loss of parental benefits plays a part in this.
- Challenges with consistency across staff perceptions of the policy and processes.
- Students coming from school having missed a lot of learning and socialising, feel they will come to College and it will be all alright as it's not school. Not ready for FE. Retention has been affected due to students withdrawing. An increase in Challenging behaviour from parents has also been an issue this academic year. Students and family wanting diagnosis to justify poor behaviour and attendance. Too much focus on diagnosis rather than need.
- We have seen a rise in toilet vandalism, disrespect of college property and low level behaviour this year.
- We are still seeing a legacy of impact from school transition, - low level attendance expectations, anxiety and inability to cope with study expectations and life challenges

with low resilience. We have seen an increase in the need to develop bespoke study programmes to support individual learning needs.

- We have a number who are on college campus but not going to class. Staff spend ages tracking them down.
- Don't underestimate the positive impact external speakers can have. They don't have to be well known. We've had parents of children who've sadly died following a physical assault or the effects of social media. You could have heard a pin drop in room full of 150+ students. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive.
- Whilst I think there is always a huge focus on the impact of social media, I think this can be an easy scapegoat for many other complex issues. Without doubt, social media can influence and shape perspectives, but we need to lean in to this, because it isn't going away. In fact, AI has and will continue to operate within the same online space, which will add further complexities around issues such as deep fakes and reality versus virtual.
- One of the main things we have seen when there has been a fight on site is when news of the fight circulates on social media and there have been surges in onlookers causing more of a disruption and a dangerous situation.
- The events and range of support offered has seen more students accessing support than in previous years leading to better retention and increased attendance.
- Attendance is a huge issue with students not seeming to recognise that non-attendance will impact their learning/lives.
- A greater level of disrespect towards peers and staff than ever before.
- Attendance and EBSA in particular is a real focus for us as a college. Attendance has declined 3% since 2020.
- Behaviour was worse initially after the pandemic, however that was a couple of years ago and the cohort now coming through did not experience so much disruption to their schooling and social development and we feel this has reduced back to normal levels now. However poor attendance remains our main behaviour concern, which it is increasingly difficult to get parents on board with.
- Parental engagement and collaboration has decreased, we have seen and experienced a barrier with working with some parents and the importance of attendance and behaviour with supporting college to address issues, some parents have become dismissive of college and the importance of educating their young people.
- Students are having a lack of discipline outside of the classroom. Disruptive, loud, anti-social behaviour in common spaces and a disrespect for the expectations on littering and vaping. Learners have an answer for everything instead of accepting they have done wrong.

Response – Be the Change

By Paul Dix, When The Adults Change

It was wonderful to meet so many of you at the NAMMS conference in April. You are fabulous people. I know that being a trusted adult to young people isn't always easy.

With two teenage boys of my own, I am all too aware of the changes social media brings to their lives and the many different pressures and challenges young people are experiencing today. We are seeing more learners finding engagement in learning difficult to access. We know more young people struggling to self-regulate and use a variety of new strategies to fight for adult attention.

It is tempting, in these wobbly moments and trickier times, to question our commitment to trauma informed, attachment aware, relational approaches. Yet, it is more important than ever to maintain our commitment to being trusted adults and developing learning environments that are emotionally safe for everyone.

The very foundations of relational practice lie in consistent adult responses that are equally 'Strong on Boundaries and Big on Heart'. It isn't about a selection of tools that you can whip out when things are escalating. It isn't about being nice. It is a consistent, collaborative commitment to safe and predictable adult responses that teach, model and motivate the behaviours we want to see.

Start slowly and take everyone with you. Revisit your 'This is how we do it here' and ensure it is rooted in emotional safety; streamline your rules or expectations; and run your responses to behaviour through the filter of being 'Strong on Boundaries and Big on Heart'

Thank you for your contribution to this report, to your settings, your communities and the young people you serve. Remember, that you are the reason that everything changes.

With my very best,

Paul Dix

Acknowledgements

The National Association for Managers of Student Services (NAMSS) would like to thank:

- Member colleges who participated in the survey, for their honest insights and feedback which has helped to inform and shape the working priorities of the association and the support we provide for our members.
- The team at When The Adults Change for their contribution and insights, helping to shape this report with meaningful reflections and actions to apply within organisations.

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