

## No Ash in Ashfield School.....

By Lexie Hayes, Vice Principal, Ashfield Girls' High School, Belfast

Eradicating smoking in schools is an aim that all secondary schools would gladly espouse but is often a problem that schools struggle to achieve. A small number of pupils who are addicted to the habit can destroy the environment in areas of a school for many pupils by smoking even for a relatively short period of time. The lingering smell permeates quickly to surrounding areas. Schools marginalise the problem but how can they prove to staff, parents and pupils that it has gone?

At Ashfield Girls' High School in Belfast we believe that we have concrete evidence to prove we have beaten the weed! The school became the first school in Northern Ireland to be declared a smoke free school by the Ulster Cancer foundation earlier this year.



Tracy Rossborough and prefect Angela show off the "Smoke Free School" Certificate

How, you may ask, can we ensure that no pupils smoke in the school? The school had a small number of persistent smokers who smoked in the toilets, mainly between classes. Some pupils were late for class, teachers felt obliged to act as attendants to police the areas if they taught nearby and pupils reported in a school audit that they were reluctant to use the toilets for fear of being labelled smokers when their clothes picked up the smell. The school senior management team researched possible approaches and we found the solution in a specially designed detector that detects tiny amounts of tobacco smoke or drug residues and sets off an audio alarm or beacon or both. These alarms were fitted in all toilet blocks and the pupils were told in assembly that they were to be activated. The old excuse "The smell was here when I arrived," was rendered redundant by the technology as pupils who were caught, if not smoking, must have been present when the culprit **was** smoking.

As a school we expected that a period of alarms would be followed by a gradual decline in the number of smoking incidents, however the reality was quite astounding! On the first day, a girl who had not been in assembly to hear that the alarms were being switched on was caught before she could take her first puff. This proved to all that the system worked and word spread like wildfire.

Apart from one other incident, the last six months have totally changed the culture amongst the smokers. An anonymous audit has proved that those who smoke no longer feel that they can escape detection and they also report that if they light up they will waste their cigarettes as they cannot get to smoke them.

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The benefits are affecting many stakeholders.

- The SMT can honestly say to prospective parents that we have a smoke –free school, policed by technology.
- The teachers have noticed the lack of activity between classes and report fewer pupils asking to get out to the toilet.
- The caretakers and cleaners have noticed the absence of butts, cigarettes and food remains in the toilets (food was often eaten as the pupils smoked).

Pupils who do not smoke reported in the school audit that they are happier going to the toilets(79% of all pupils) and feel that peer pressure to smoke has been reduced (85% of all pupils).

Our principal Mrs Adeline Dinsmore speaking to the Ulster cancer Foundation said “Within a matter of days we had eradicated a problem we had struggled for years to solve”. This sends a positive message to all present and prospective pupils and parents. We can market ourselves as a smoke free school!”

Claire Smith of the Ulster Cancer Foundation says” Most teenagers who smoke are persuaded by their peers, so for the school to break the cycle is a major step. Research has shown that if a young person can reach their teens without smoking then they are unlikely to ever smoke. Ashfield girls’ is to be congratulated on taking positive action to help protect the health and wellbeing of its pupils”.

For a small outlay of less than two thousand pounds a perennial problem has been solved inside the school. The school is developing a programme with the Ulster Cancer Foundation to help teenagers quit the habit.

Lexie Hayes  
Vice Principal  
Ashfield Girls' High School



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