

Advice Sheet 14

COLLEGIAL SUPPORT

"*Ní neart go cur le chéile*" is an old Irish proverb which means "there is no strength without unity".

In schools, we rely on the support of colleagues to make our job easier and more enjoyable. This support is especially important when we:

- Celebrate achievement (either a personal or a collective achievement)
- Need advice or help
- Have been present when a serious incident of challenging behaviour has occurred

While mentoring systems for newly qualified teachers / principals are now beginning to appear, we can do a huge amount for each other by the informal support we provide to our team-mates on staff. In particular, we may wish to receive support after a serious incident has occurred which we have witnessed or been party to.

The support we provide can be moral, structural and professional support.

- Moral support: being there to listen to your colleague and to let them express their feelings
- Structural support: offering help and suggestions that might alleviate / minimise any future occurrences (e.g. suggesting to your colleague to send a pupil to you if this happens again)
- Professional support: explore with your colleague if there are any strategies or ideas that they think might help them to deal with it more effectively the next time.

In supporting a colleague after an incident has occurred, we may need to:

- Listen: to what s/he has to say and be aware of the feelings / emotions s/he is expressing
- Discuss: how s/he feels now and ask in what way you might be able to help
- Reassure: s/he that the incident has passed and that steps will be taken to address his/her concerns.

It's also worth considering:

- Where we give the support / do the listening – perhaps not in the room where the incident occurred but in a relaxing place, with a cup of coffee, or by going for a walk with our colleague;
- How many people we want to be there: sometimes one other is best, other times we might wish to have two or more colleagues available for support or to bounce ideas around;
- Whether there are other ways of relieving tension / shock after an incident – some people don't want to talk to anyone on staff but would prefer to deal privately or in other ways with their emotions. We all have different coping strategies – respect someone's right not to seek support or advice.

A school may need to consider having a whole-school policy on debriefing after an incident. This policy would need to be explored and teased out among all members of staff to arrive at an agreed position that will be of benefit to all. Use the resources on staff to help with this process – perhaps someone has a counselling qualification which could be very useful.