



MLL Peer Support Program in Schools

Evaluation Report



THE MANNERHEIM LEAGUE
FOR CHILD WELFARE

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The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (MLL), founded in 1920, is an open nationwide non-governmental organization promoting children's right to a good and safe childhood. Membership of the MLL central organization consists of 10 district organizations and 566 local associations with a total of 93,000 members.

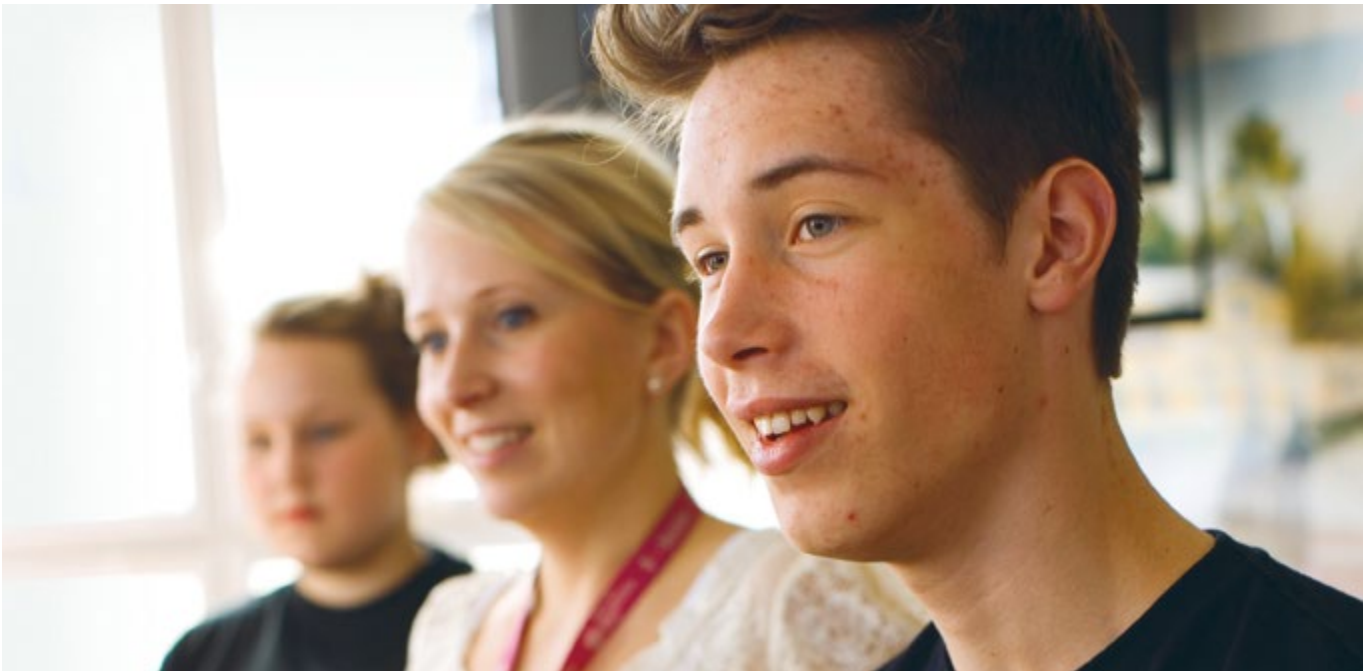
The League promotes the well-being of families with children by providing peer support and creating opportunities to participate in different life circumstances. The League also provides training, conducts surveys and produces materials for schools and educators – working diversely towards implementation of children's rights.

The League's core areas of operation are:

- promotion of the well-being and living conditions of children and their families;
- promotion of the consultation and participation of children;
- respect for and protection of childhood;
- respect and support for parenthood.

Annually

- The helpline and website service for children and young people answers about 38,000 phone calls and online enquiries.
- The helpline and website service for parents answers about 1,000 contacts.
- Lower secondary schools have 14,000 MLL peer supporters. On the Internet, young people receive support from a group of dozens of young online peer supporters.
- About 1,200 MLL-trained babysitters work with almost 6,000 families.
- 300 MLL-trained support workers help families and young people.
- The League maintains about 440 family cafés where people gather about 12,000 times.
- The League operates about 400 peer and other groups for adults.
- There are over 160,000 visits to MLL hobby clubs.
- The League runs a campaign entitled A Good Start to School, which reaches the parents of more than 55,000 first-graders, reminding them about the importance of being there and caring for their children as they start school.
- The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare provides people of all ages with opportunities to participate in its efforts for the benefit of children. Local voluntary activities form the foundation of its operations.



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What is a peer support scheme?

Peer support systems in schools are defined as flexible frameworks within which children and young people are trained to offer emotional and social support to fellow students in distress (Cowie & Jennifer 2008). Beyond mutual help, the strength of the system lies in its potential to create a cooperative community based on mutual trust and respect (Cowie & Smith 2010). In recent years, peer support programmes have become more popular internationally in schools, and there is also a growing body of scientific research about its potential (Palladino et al. 2012; Cowie et al. 2008; Cowie & Hutson 2005; Salmivalli 1999).

In Finland, the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (MLL) has developed and coordinated the peer support scheme for 40 years. During this time, peer support activities have spread into almost all Finnish lower secondary schools (grades 7–9 of basic education) and many schools have established a peer support scheme as a permanent part of their core activities. In its early years during the 1970's, the MLL peer support scheme focused on substance abuse prevention, but it has since expanded to cover a diverse range of practices. The League's work is based on the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child, which stresses the importance of child and youth participation. The scheme empowers young people to take responsibility and act in their schools to support the whole school community and promote well-being at school.

The main aims of the peer support scheme are:

- to promote considerate behaviour;
- to increase young people's participation at school;
- to prevent problems; and
- to help personal growth.

The aims are based on the Finnish Basic Education Act (628/1998, section 2), which states that the purpose of basic education 'is to support pupils' growth into humanity and into ethically responsible membership of society and to provide them with knowledge and skills needed in life'.

In Finland, the peer support approach is used at all educational levels. Primary

schools have 10–12-year-old pupils trained to support the smallest children starting school. In lower secondary schools, peer supporters are eighth- and ninth-graders (aged 14–16)¹. Correspondingly, the majority of vocational institutions and general upper secondary schools in Finland have a peer support scheme in place.

Peer supporters are ordinary pupils who want to help others and contribute to the school community on a voluntary basis. They receive appropriate training, but there must always be an adult coordinator to run the scheme and supervise them. The services of peer supporters include promoting team building and positive group behaviour by running class discussions and organizing various games and activities that help pupils bond with each other and work together. Peer supporters also play an important role in preventing and combating bullying. They also arrange a wide variety of activities designed to promote a more supportive atmosphere at school, while at the same time learning from the activities and processes themselves.

Conflicts, loneliness, exclusion and becoming ostracized are everyday occurrences in school life. Peer support does not eliminate these problems, but it helps prevent and combat them before they develop into a crisis.

The peer support scheme has established itself in Finland and has a successful track record. The scope and range of peer support activities vary from school to school. Regardless of the level of education, the underlying idea behind peer support is to empower pupils to support each other and help new pupils to integrate into the school community. The scheme also involves the idea of older pupils providing positive role models and acting as 'buddies' for newcomers.

Pupils who become peer supporters gain long-term social benefits, such as in-

creased self-esteem and improved interpersonal skills. The scheme aims to encourage peer supporters as well as other pupils to explore their roles within the wider community. Peer supporters also help other pupils become aware of their responsibilities towards others and encourage them to contribute to their schools and to the wider community. They help solve problems between disputing pupils, instil values of tolerance into the school community and support a positive school ethos.

i Further information on peer support and its implementation: [Setting up Peer Support Programmes in Schools – a step-by-step Guide](#). The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare, 2011.

¹ As many Finnish comprehensive schools have integrated their primary and lower secondary levels, the activities and processes involved in their peer support schemes no longer focus exclusively on pupils in the transition phase between levels, but also on those in the lower grades of comprehensive school.

MLL support for peer support activities

Peer support is the most important form of the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare's involvement with young people and schools. As things stand today, approximately 90% of the lower secondary grades (7–9) of comprehensive schools in Finland have adopted the MLL peer support scheme.

Each year, the nationwide MLL peer support network includes over 14,000 peer supporters, 900 peer support coordinators in schools and 40 certified MLL peer support trainers. The peer support scheme is supported by staff at the MLL central office and its 10 district offices, as well as by hundreds of volunteers in the League's local associations¹.

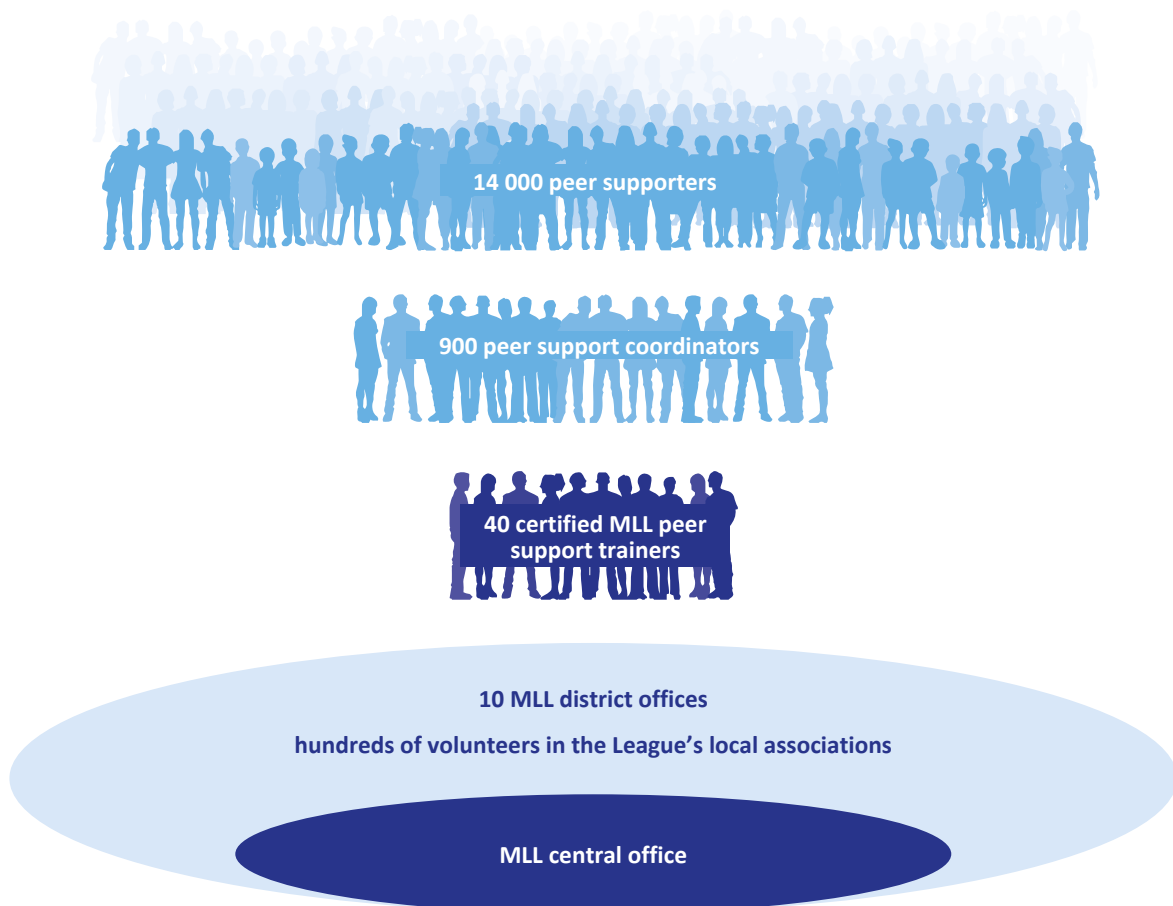
¹ The Mannerheim League has 565 local associations in Finland.

The youth work team at the MLL central office is responsible for developing the peer support scheme and for providing information and training for peer support coordinators and peer support trainers. Apart from training, the central office also produces training materials and manuals designed for coordinators, peer support trainers and peer supporters. The work is funded by Finland's Slot Machine Association and through private donations.

Youth work coordinators at the League's district organizations communicate with schools, coordinate the local trainers' visits to schools and organize meetings for coordinators and peer supporters in the region. In addition, district organizations communicate regularly with those responsible for youth work in the League's local associations.

Local associations provide schools with practical support for setting up and sustaining peer support. For example, this can involve contributing to the costs of training peer supporters (trainer fees, venues, catering, etc.). Local associations also offer occasional assistance for training peer supporters or provide them with T-shirts, badges or hooded jackets (imprinted with the peer support scheme's logo) to improve their visibility. In addition, local associations sometimes offer grants to peer supporters.

Peer support network



Objectives and implementation of the evaluation

Objectives and targets of the evaluation

The evaluation aimed to obtain information about the strengths and improvement areas of peer support schemes running at Finnish lower secondary schools and to develop peer support activities and relevant guidance and organization of activities at schools. The evaluation examined the operating conditions for peer support and its organization as part of the activities of pupils and school communities. In addition, it explored cooperation carried out by the MLL district organizations and local associations with schools. The evaluation process also made use of prior studies and reports.

The evaluation process and methods

The evaluation applied participatory, development-oriented and complex evaluation approaches. Participation was promoted by emphasizing the active roles of different interested parties at different stages of the evaluation process. Development orientation, in turn, was related both to learning through self-evaluation and external evaluation within the evaluation process and to the proposals for improvement produced in the process. The complexity of the evaluation was ensured by involving different parties in self-evaluation within schools. The external evaluation team also represented different parties.

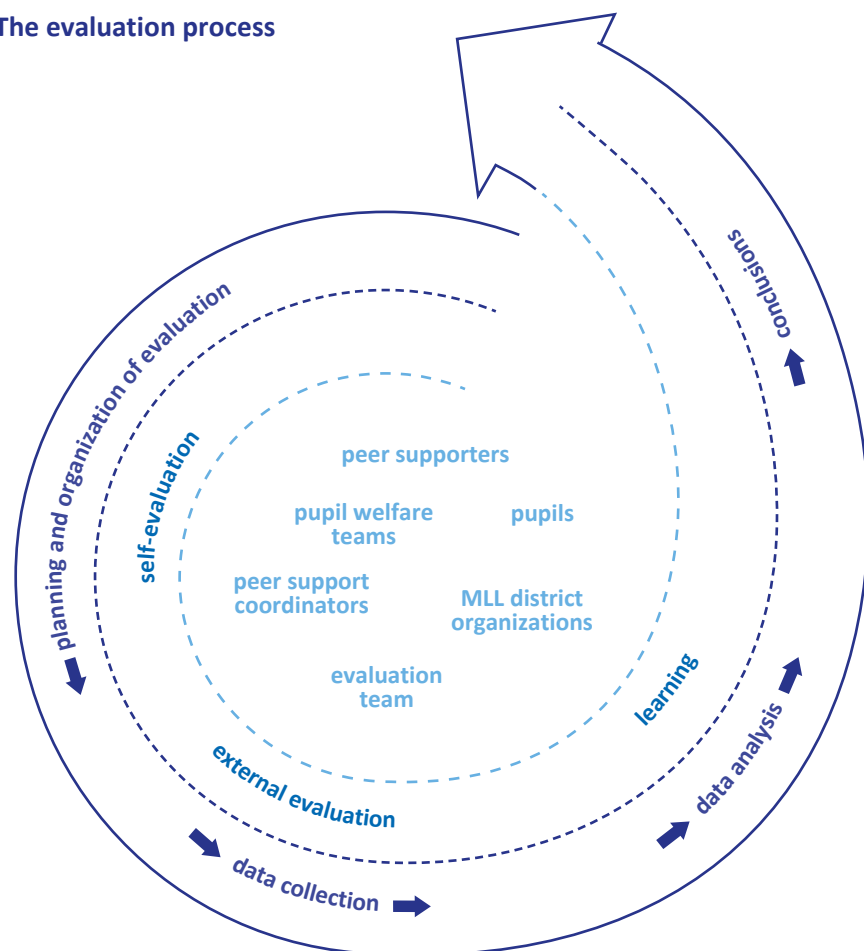
The evaluation was implemented by a multidisciplinary evaluation team led by Ms. Anu Räisänen, Doctor of Health Sciences and an expert in evaluation. The evaluation team included a school head, a peer support coordinator, an MLL peer support trainer and four MLL employees responsible for the peer support scheme (see page 2).

The data was collected by means of four different questionnaires sent to schools¹: one for schools' pupil welfare teams², one for peer supporters' groups, one for individual peer supporters and one for Class 8A pupils.

For the purpose of data collection, a regionally representative sampling process was carried out, covering 10% of all Finnish-language lower secondary schools. The evaluation did not target Swedish-language schools or special schools. Heads of the 94 sample schools were contacted by telephone to request permission for the research to be carried out. Only 12 schools refused to participate in the evaluation, while another nine did not have a peer support scheme in place. Consequently, questionnaires were sent to 73 schools. A total of 55 schools (75%) returned the questionnaires for all the respondent groups, which can be considered to be a very high rate. Personal questionnaires were filled in by a total of 934 peer supporters and 1,047 eighth-grade pupils (Table 1). A further survey was conducted for the 10 MLL district organizations, all of which responded. The data was collected in February 2012.

Responsibility for data analysis and conclusions rested with the evaluation team, which was led by a Doctor of Health Sciences and included a school

The evaluation process



1 The questionnaires are available on request; please contact via www.mll.fi/peersupport.

2 Section 31a of the Finnish Basic Education Act (628/1998) states as follows: 'A pupil shall be entitled to free pupil welfare necessary for participation in education. Pupil welfare means action promoting and maintaining good learning, good mental and physical health and social well-being, and conditions conducive to these.' Pupil welfare is mostly implemented at school by school heads, teachers, school health care workers and school social workers.

Table 1. Evaluation data and response rates

Target group	Sample schools f	Respondent schools/ pupils	Response rate %
Pupil welfare teams	73	55	75
Peer support groups	73	55	75
Peer supporters	73	61/934	84
Class 8A pupils	73	59/1,047	81
MLL district organizations	10	10	100

head, a peer support coordinator, an MLL peer support trainer and MLL employees responsible for peer support activities. The MLL employees carried out the statistical analyses of the data and produced summaries of their results for the evaluation team (frequencies, means, analyses of background variables and comparisons of respondent groups). The qualitative material (open-ended answers) gathered from the questionnaires was analysed such that each evaluation team member concentrated on a specific evaluation theme, read the open-ended answers relating to their own theme and produced a summary of these for the evaluation team. The evaluation team convened several times to analyse all the results and worked together to form interpretations of and conclusions from the results.

Finally, the evaluation team organized a workshop seminar to interpret the results and discuss the conclusions together with the heads, peer support coordinators and peer supporters from the schools involved in the evaluation. The workshop attracted a total of 25 people from five schools located in different parts of Finland. In November 2012, a concise report distributed to all Finnish-language schools was published in Finnish (Peura 2012). The evaluation results have been discussed at several seminars and training events during 2012 and 2013.

The evaluation results are described as a summary of the responses submitted by pupil welfare teams, peer supporters, peer support groups and eighth-graders. The results have been

grouped as follows: peer supporters' activities, peer support coordinators' activities and the status of peer support activities at school. Each chapter ends with a list of proposals for improvement produced by the evaluation team.

EVALUATION TARGETS AND QUESTIONS

1. What are peer support activities like from the perspective of peer supporters?

- Application and selection as a peer supporter
- Training for peer supporters
- Objectives of peer support activities
- Forms and implementation of peer support activities
- Factors promoting and hindering peer support activities

2. What kind of role do schools' peer support coordinators play in peer support activities?

- Selection of coordinators
- Coordinator training
- Guidance resources

3. How is peer support organized in practice?

- Peer support as part of the curriculum and annual plan
- Factors promoting and hindering peer support activities
- Objectives of peer support activities as defined by the pupil welfare team

- Peer support activities in relation to the pupil association and other forms of activity
- Provision of information on peer support activities
- Evaluation of peer support activities
- Impact of peer support activities and MLL support
- Realisation of quality recommendations
- Improvement of peer support activities

4. What kinds of results and impact have been achieved through peer support?

- Achievement of objectives
- Factors promoting and hindering peer support activities
- Impact of peer support activities
- Satisfaction with peer support activities

5. What areas for improvement are there in peer support activities?

- Areas and proposals for improvement

Activities of peer supporters

Forms of activity

The Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2004¹ requires schools to reinforce collaborative operating methods and promote pupils' involvement as part of development of well-being at school. Involvement or participation refers to influencing the course of events stemming from personal commitment and assuming responsibility for the consequences of one's own actions². When a young person is capable of bearing responsibility for the consequences of their own actions, they will also start taking responsibility for their own community and for the well-being of its members. The school is one of the most important forums where the rights of children and young people to participation can be realised in practice³. Peer supporters' activities promote increasing pupils' participation in many ways.

Based on the evaluation results, peer supporters play a very active and diverse

role at many schools. Figure 1 indicates the most common forms of activity. Peer supporters take part in supporting new pupils at all schools. They do this most commonly by organizing team-building activities for seventh-graders, holding peer support classes for younger pupils and providing support for seventh-graders in everyday school life. Peer supporters are often assigned their own 7th grades, for whom they hold peer support classes covering topics such as friendship, substance abuse and prevention of bullying.

The objective most often cited by peer supporters for their activities was

to improve the atmosphere, community spirit and satisfaction at school. Peer supporters believed that the best way to build a good school atmosphere and community spirit was to organize events and theme days and they wished to get more opportunities to do this. At almost all schools, peer supporters arrange various school campaigns, theme days and other events, such as Valentine's Day, International Colour Day, Halloween parties, Christmas parties and discos. Furthermore, peer supporters hold morning assemblies at many schools. They are also invited to participate in parent-teacher meetings at over two

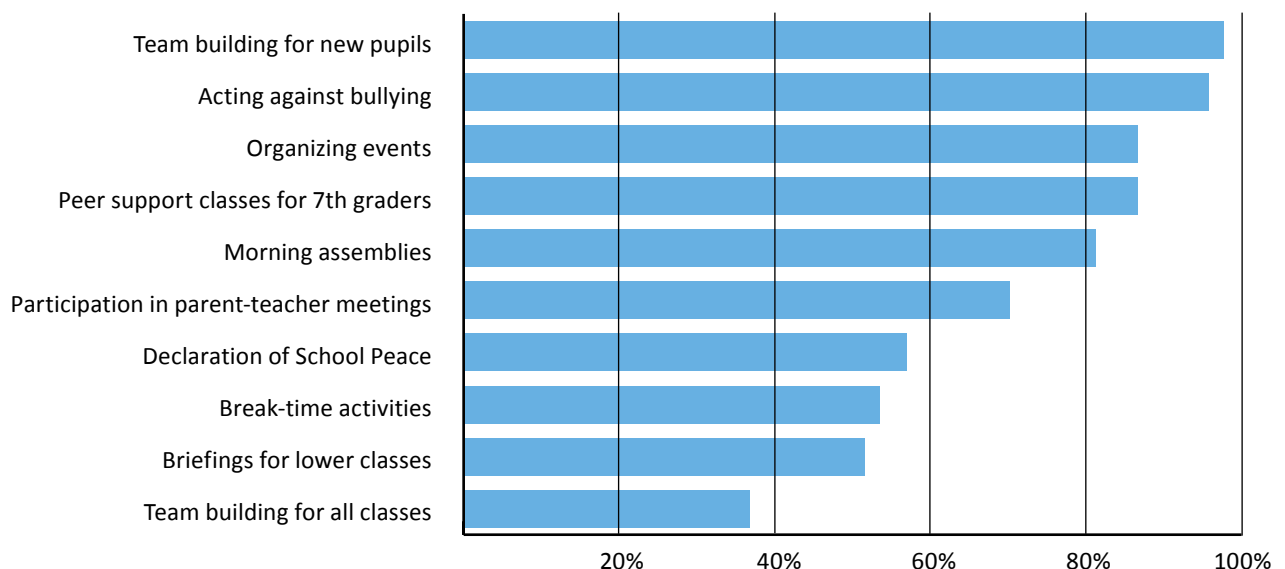
There is widespread interest in becoming a peer supporter: 39% of eighth-graders are planning to apply for the role.

1 Finnish National Board of Education 2004. A National Core Curriculum is a national framework document that provides a basis for preparation of local curricula.

2 Viirkorpi 1993; Uusitalo & Laakso 2005.

3 Hakalehto-Vainio 2012, 74.

Figure 1. Prevalence of peer supporters' forms of activity at school according to pupil welfare teams.



thirds of schools. Usually they introduce themselves and present the school's peer support activities to parents.

In recent years, the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare has encouraged peer supporters to organize break-time activities, because problems relating to bullying and loneliness intensify during breaks⁴. Based on the results, peer supporters have already become keen on organizing break-time activities at more than 50% of schools.

In addition to building community spirit, peer support activities can be geared towards promoting many issues relating to pupils' well-being, such as preventing substance abuse and increasing emotional skills and online safety. The Mannerheim League has provided further training and materials for schools on these topics, among others. In most cases, peer supporters will receive further training on these topics and will then hold activity-based briefings for other pupils. The evaluation results indicate that peer supporters have held briefings about different topics at every other school. The most common theme has been prevention of substance abuse – the same topic from which the peer support scheme originated in the 1970's.

While the activities take on diverse forms, they seem to focus primarily on seventh-graders at many schools. Many eighth-graders regretted that activities only concentrated on seventh-graders at their own school. Just like peer supporters themselves, a considerable share of eighth-graders also suggested that peer supporters should organize more community-building events and theme days for the whole school. Peer support activities are also appreciated: as many as 39% of eighth-graders had planned to apply to become peer supporters, but only some of those willing are selected for the role. The results suggest that both peer supporters and other pupils would be much more interested in participating and influencing at school than allowed by the opportunities offered by schools. An

international comparison⁵ also indicates that young people's participatory culture is not well-established in Finnish schools and young people feel lack of opportunities to influence.

Supporting new pupils

The most common reason to become a peer supporter was the desire to help other pupils. Many pupils who had become peer supporters felt that they had received significant support from their own supporters and would therefore like to offer similar experiences to new seventh-graders. Peer supporters wanted to help young people moving from primary to lower secondary school adjust to their new school.

According to the results of the peer support evaluation, peer supporters make active efforts to improve seventh-graders' friendships and school satisfaction. In addition to peer support classes and team-building sessions, peer supporters also organize special events and break-time games for seventh-graders, for example. They also spend time with seventh-graders in everyday school life.

Based on the evaluation results, peer support activities are most successful in providing support and team building for seventh-graders. All respondent groups considered the activities focused on seventh-graders to be important and a clear majority of all respondent groups felt that peer support activities help new pupils adjust to community in school.

'I was alone for quite some time, but the peer supporters helped and advised me. :)'

'Wrong beliefs were set right. Many fears turned out to be misplaced.'

'I didn't even know that peer supporters exist!'

Eighth-graders were more critical in their own assessments than peer supporters

and pupil welfare teams. Approximately 80% of eighth-graders remembered that peer supporters had led get-together games for their own class and about 60% had participated in classes held by peer supporters. Some eighth-graders felt that they did not get to know their peer supporters properly: they did not get to spend enough time with supporters or the activities were limited to the beginning of the school year. Just over a quarter of them felt that they had been personally encouraged by a peer supporter when they first arrived at the new school. One in ten reported asking a peer supporter for advice on some issue.

The eighth-graders who were most satisfied with peer support activities were at those schools where activities were vigorous. They also felt that peer supporters were much more approachable and ranked the ability of their own school's peer support scheme to reduce bullying and loneliness to be clearly better.

Anti-bullying work

All pupil welfare teams were unanimous that anti-bullying work was one of the key aims of peer support activities. The same observation was also made in previous surveys⁶. In addition to prevention of bullying, almost all pupil welfare teams defined the role of peer supporters to cover intervention in bullying as well. This was also widely expected in responses from eighth-graders, who criticized peer supporters for not doing enough to intervene in bullying. They felt that peer supporters should pay more attention to lonely pupils as well.

The responses of peer supporters also included plenty of references to intervention in bullying. Their responses brought up concerns and feelings of inadequacy about not being able to give enough help to bullied and lonely pupils. Peer supporters intervened in bullying incidents by means such as stepping in, standing up for a pupil being bullied

4 Peura, Kirves & Pelkonen 2009.

5 Kupari & Siisiäinen 2012, 79–83.

6 Mertala 2011; Hänninen & Tiainen 2005.

or breaking up a fight. They wished to receive further training in this respect.

Bullying is a complex phenomenon, where group members play a decisive role in determining whether or not bullying is allowed to go on. Defending the victim undermines the position of power gained by the bully within the group⁷. A peer supporter may play a significant role in changing and influencing group dynamics by defending and helping the victim. At the same time, they may set an example for others, spreading an atmosphere within the group that may clearly reduce bullying.

Bullying may go unnoticed by school staff and, according to a survey conducted by the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare on well-being at school, telling school staff about it does not help in many cases, or it may even make the victim's situation more difficult⁸. Con-

versely, speaking to a peer supporter will seldom exacerbate the situation. In their responses to the evaluation survey, peer supporters reported that they had engaged in supportive discussions, encouraged bullied pupils and helped them find an adult to confide in.

While peer supporters may play a significant role in anti-bullying work, it is important to understand that resolving bullying situations that have already emerged is a demanding task, which should always be an adult's responsibility⁹. Under no circumstances can it be left for young people to deal with by themselves. The evaluation suggests that peer supporters are therefore faced with expectations that are too high. Their role should be linked more closely to preventive activities instead of intervention in bullying.

7 Pöyhönen et al. 2012; Salmivalli 2010.

8 Peura, Kirves, Pelkonen 2009.

9 Salmivalli 2010.

PROPOSALS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Schools should ensure that peer supporters receive enough training for supporting new pupils and prevention of bullying.
- Schools should increase opportunities for peer supporters to spend time with different pupils, thus increasing their recognition. The forms of activity may include peer support classes or supervised break-time activities.
- Schools should specify the roles and responsibilities of peer supporters in anti-bullying work and record these in their anti-bullying plans.
- Schools should play an active role in providing information about peer support activities and promote the visibility and recognition of peer supporters at school.
- Schools should expand their peer support schemes to focus on the entire school community or, at least, eighth-grade pupils. If new peer supporters already start in grade 8, they have two years to work in support of their juniors.
- Schools should develop diverse opportunities for voluntary activities, in order for young people to learn how to participate in their own community and contribute to its well-being.

*Helping prevent
bullying at school.*

Activities of peer support coordinators

Working hours spent by coordinators

To facilitate their voluntary work, peer supporters need an adult – a peer support coordinator – to guide them at school. A peer support coordinator can be any teacher or staff member appointed in this role and it can be assigned to a different individual on an annual basis. The role of the peer support coordinator has been permanently included in the job description of a guidance counsellor¹ or a school social worker² at one in ten schools. The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare recommends that every school should have two peer support coordinators. Based on the evaluation results, however, every other school only has one peer support coordinator.

The majority of peer support coordinators spend an average of one to two hours per week on these duties, but there are marked differences between schools. The amount of hours also varies during the course of a school term; most

- 1 Guidance counsellor: a guidance counsellor provides comprehensive school pupils with guidance and counselling for planning their studies, applying for further studies and career orientation as part of the school's pupil welfare team.
- 2 School social worker: a school social worker supports pupils' well-being, positive development and schooling by means of social work as part of the school's pupil welfare team.

Prevention of problems and intervention in them is better at those schools where peer support coordinators have received MLL training for the role.

time is spent during theme days and team-building activities for seventh-graders. Peer support coordinators generally feel that they do not have enough working hours for the task and that this is a key factor hindering peer supporters' activities. This is also corroborated by the evaluation results: both peer supporters and eighth-graders ranked the impact of peer support activities to be clearly better at those schools where coordinators spent at least 1.5 hours per week on these activities.

The majority of peer support coordinators receive some kind of remuneration for their work. The most common way to compensate them is to add extra hours to their basic teaching salary. One in ten coordinators does not receive any extra remuneration for their work. In

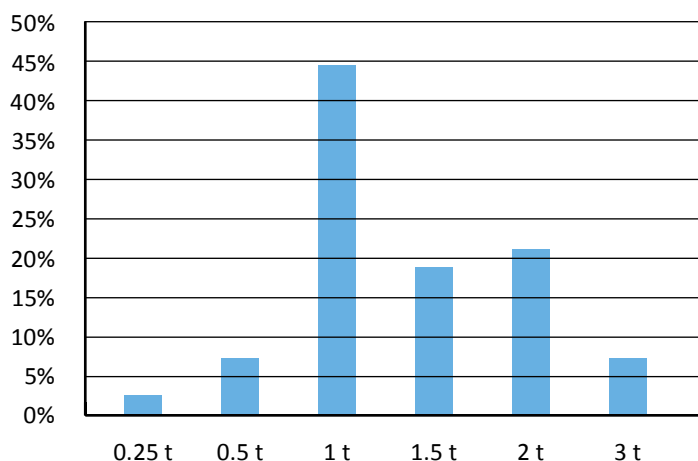
some cases (guidance counsellors, school social workers), the role is included in the job description. However, many coordinators work completely without compensation.

Coordinator training and other MLL support

Approximately 80% of peer support coordinators have taken the two-day basic training course for coordinators organized by the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare. In addition, about half of the coordinators have participated in MLL seminars organized in support of guiding peer support activities, while just over a third have taken other MLL further training courses (covering topics such as team building, online safety, substance abuse). The effects of coordinator training were evident in the results in many ways. Satisfaction with peer support activities among eighth-graders was significantly higher at schools where coordinators had completed training courses when compared with those schools where coordinators had not received any training for the role. Likewise, peer supporters were also clearly more satisfied with activities if their coordinator had received training for the role. Some peer supporters even had the insight to call for more training for their coordinators.

The evaluation results suggest that training also influences the quality of peer support activities. The impact of peer support activities in terms of preventing and intervening in problems was perceived to be better at schools where peer support coordinators had received

Figure 2. Weekly working hours spent by coordinators on peer support activities.



MLL training when compared with schools where coordinators had not received any training for the role. Differences were statistically very significant.

Coordinators also make active use of other types of support offered by the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare. Virtually all coordinators (98%) use MLL peer support materials, which include tools and training materials to support their guidance work. Almost all coordinators (92%) use the MLL peer support website, searching for ideas and materials in support of their activities. Furthermore, many coordinators visit the MLL Nuortennetti (YouthNet) website together with peer supporters, which provides information on sexuality and dating, mental health, bullying and intoxicants for young people. They also order peer support products (such as videos, clothing and pin-back buttons) from the MLL web store. Almost three out of four coordinators subscribe to the MLL e-newsletter, which provides information about current topics relating to peer support. Schools wished for the Mannerheim League to organize more training courses and trainers' visits to schools as well as local support and cooperation. In their own evaluation survey, the MLL district organizations brought up the needs of schools for local support, but many reported that they had inadequate resources to provide it.

Selection of peer supporters

Peer support coordinators are responsible for selecting peer supporters at their own school. Pupils find peer support activities interesting and the peer supporter's role is very popular at many schools. As many as 39% of those eighth-graders who responded to the survey had planned to apply to become peer supporters.

Selection procedures vary considerably from school to school, but all schools used some sort of application procedure, at least an application form, usually complete with interviews. Many schools organize a presentation of peer support activities before the application procedure, where peer supporters generally play a significant role. One in ten schools expected applicants to take an optional peer support course to be considered for selection as peer sup-

porters. Many peer support coordinators consulted other teachers to facilitate their selection. At several schools, old peer supporters were also involved in selecting new ones.

According to pupil welfare teams, there is a wide range of requirements in place for pupils to be selected as peer supporters. For instance, applicants are expected to be well-behaved and adhere to rules, while some schools also require sobriety. Selection of peer supporters emphasizes aptitude for the role: peer supporters should be sociable, open, reliable, active and motivated and they are expected to pay equal attention to other people.

Although school staff have high expectations towards peer supporters, the evaluation suggests that schools have managed to select a diverse range of pupils as peer supporters. Less than 10% of eighth-graders felt that all peer supporters were alike. Girls account for about 70% of peer supporters, while boys make up the remaining 30%.

'Yup, there are plenty of styles and also those to whom I'd never speak.'

'They are all different in looks and personality, so they don't belong to the "mass".'

'There are former victims of bullying who genuinely want to help, but there are also peer supporters who are only interested in raising their Behaviour grade and getting out of class!'

According to Youth Barometer 2012³, peer support activities are one of the most popular forms of voluntary activi-

ties among young Finns. Active involvement in various voluntary activities tends to accumulate to the same young people. The Youth Barometer suggests, however, that peer support activities involve an especially large number of those who do not take part in any other forms of voluntary activities.

Training for peer supporters

Schools' peer support coordinators are responsible for organizing training for peer supporters. The evaluation results suggest that peer supporters receive some basic training at all schools. However, its duration varies considerably, ranging from 3 to 38 hours. The Mannerheim League's recommendation for a minimum of 16 hours of basic training is only realized at every other school. A quarter of schools only provided three to eight hours of training for peer supporters. One in ten schools offered an optional peer support course, which means that the duration of training was considerably longer.

About half of schools ordered basic training for peer supporters completely or partly from the Mannerheim League. Some schools organized peer support training on their own with the aid of MLL materials. Several schools organized training in cooperation with the local parish or municipal youth work services.

Slightly less than half of schools (41%) had organized further training for peer supporters, which was most commonly related to substance abuse, bullying and team building. The reason for the absence of further training cited by pupil welfare teams was almost invariably the lack of resources: some had no time and others had no funds. Just over a third of peer supporters reported that they needed further training. Peer supporters wished to receive better instructions and advice on topics such as organizing games and peer support classes and approaching lonely pupils.

At schools where the duration of training was close to the MLL recommendation, eighth-graders felt that peer supporters were more approachable. Conversely, peer supporters were clearly less approachable in other pupils' opin-

³ Myllyniemi (ed.) 2012, 21–22. Youth Barometer: a survey of developments in the attitudes and expectations of young people aged 15 to 29 conducted annually since 1994 by the Advisory Council for Youth Affairs, an expert body on child and youth policy set up by the Government. Some of the questions are repeated regularly, which makes it possible to follow more long-term changes in attitudes, while others are related to current themes.

Figure 3. Duration of basic training for peer supporters (amount of training)

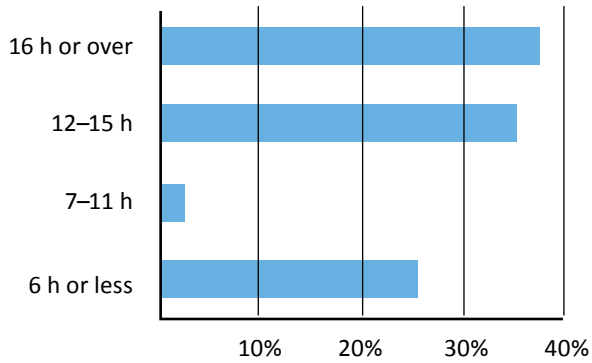
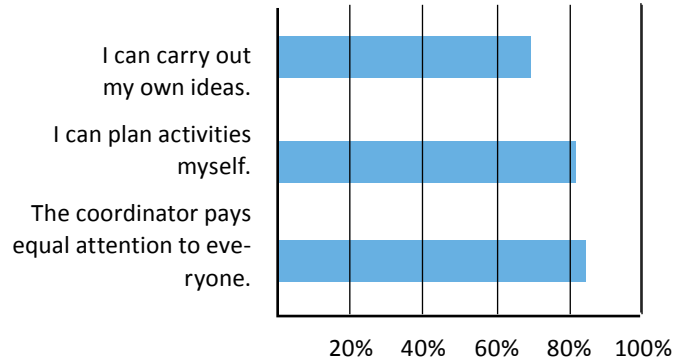


Figure 4. Planning of activities from the peer supporter perspective



ion at schools that did not provide much training.

Planning the activities

Peer supporters generally convene about once each week to plan their activities and the peer support coordinator takes part in planning situations in all or most cases. Together they plan peer support classes or selection of new peer supporters or activities such as theme days, events or team-building activities for seventh-graders, and draw up an action plan.

Peer supporters plan events and theme days, peer support classes and break-time activities independently at a third of schools. They may also carry out new campaign drives, brainstorming sessions, team-building activities and morning assemblies on their own. One in eight schools does not allow peer supporters to plan anything independently.

Peer supporters plan their activities together with many different parties. These may include youth workers,

the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare and other school staff, such as subject teachers, the school head or the guidance counsellor. Activities are also planned in cooperation with the board of the pupil association, the local parish and peer supporters from other schools.

Peer supporters mainly brainstorm activities at their joint meetings. Brainstorming is also carried out online, such as on Facebook or school-specific Internet portals. They find tips for planning from materials and training courses offered by the Mannerheim League and other parties as well as from other pupils who may be surveyed, for example. About 15% of peer supporters feel that not all peer supporters can participate in the activities on an equal footing. This is often hindered by a large peer support group, which makes it difficult to take everyone into account. Moreover, some felt that the peer support coordinator favoured certain pupils and assigned more responsibility to them than to others.

PROPOSALS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Schools should ensure that peer support coordinators have enough time for peer support activities.
- Schools should make sure that all peer support coordinators have participated in coordinator training.
- Sufficient basic training should be organized for peer supporters.
- The selection process for peer supporters should be carried out carefully and equally so as to select a diverse range of young people as peer supporters. Roles and responsibilities suitable for different peer supporters should be developed.
- Peer support coordinators should ensure that peer supporters convene regularly and that they are assigned a suitable place for their meetings.
- Peer support coordinators should also make sure that all peer supporters get a chance to participate in activities and bring their own contributions to the peer support group.
- The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare should strengthen regional support and training activities for peer support schemes and support schools in development of local cooperation.

Status of peer support activities at school

Peer support activities in school plans

During 40 years in existence, peer support activities have spread into almost all Finnish lower secondary schools (grades 7–9 of basic education) and many schools have established a peer support scheme as a permanent part of their core activities. Among the schools involved in the evaluation, the lower secondary levels of integrated comprehensive schools (with grades 1–9) and other lower secondary schools had been implementing peer support schemes for an average of 12 and 19 years, respectively, in 2012. Almost all schools (96%) have included their peer support schemes in their annual plans¹. More than two thirds of schools have also recorded peer support in the school curriculum² and one in two schools has included it as part of their pupil welfare plans³. Recording a peer support scheme in the school's annual plan is often the prerequisite for allocating the required space and staff resources to the activities. Schools where peer support had only been included in the annual plan understood peer support activities as being 'external activities'.

1 An annual plan drawn up on the basis of the local and school-specific curricula, on which the education and teaching provided by the school are based. (Source: Website of the Finnish National Board of Education)

2 The school-specific part of the curriculum governing provision of basic education. (Source: Website of the Finnish National Board of Education)

3 A plan describing the general principles of and cooperation, mutual division of work and responsibilities in pupil welfare services as well as the school's actions to promote the health and safety of the school community. (Source: Website of the National Institute for Health and Welfare)

Regardless of the scheme's long history, it has indeed been noted that a key challenge for peer support activities is to consolidate their status as part of the school community⁴. The challenge involves the visibility of peer support as well as awareness and appreciation of its forms. It is important to consider how the school community endorses the peer supporters and their coordinators and whether development of the social atmosphere is overshadowed by subjects and knowledge contents. There are significant differences between schools in this respect.

Pupil welfare teams considered it very important for the school head and other staff to be familiar with and endorse peer support activities. In practical terms, peer support coordinators often feel that they are left to shoulder the responsibility for peer support activities on their own. There are many schools where not all teachers are all that familiar with the activities and some take a dim view of peer supporters being occasionally absent from their classes due to peer support activities. Peer supporters also felt that they had not received feedback from teachers or other pupils. They had mostly received feedback from their own coordinator and the school head. About a third of peer supporters had never received any praise.

Pupil welfare teams and coordinators cited general appreciation for peer support and remuneration for coordinators as important factors promoting the activities. General challenges identified were coordinators' shortage of working hours,

turnover of coordinators and, at some schools, inadequate meeting facilities and scarce operating budgets.

Establishing a peer support scheme on a permanent basis seems to require time. Resources allocated to peer support activities were clearly better at schools that had been running their schemes for at least ten years. These schools are more likely to have two coordinators, pay better remuneration for coordinators and assign more working hours to the role.

Cooperation with different parties

Schools cooperate with several external parties in peer support activities. Training courses or camps for peer supporters are organized in cooperation with the local parish or municipal youth work services. More than half of the schools cooperate with MLL local associations or district organizations. In cases where schools cooperated with an MLL district organization or local association, peer supporters felt that they had more opportunities to influence their own activities than in cases where such cooperation did not exist.

Peer support activities seem to create a good interface for cooperation between schools and external parties. Cooperation between schools and youth work services may help schools shape their operational culture so as to provide young people with opportunities to participate in and influence all matters concerning them within their own school community.

4 Perho 2006, 48.

The whole school community's support is important for peer support activities.

Improvement of activities

The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare has set general goals for peer support activities, but the idea is for each school to decide independently on more specific objectives and forms of activity. The basic idea of peer support activities is for young people to plan and carry out the activities themselves, thus participating in building their school community.

Based on the evaluation results, peer supporters are only involved in defining the objectives of their own activities at every other school. At many schools, staff defined the objectives on their own,

while as many as a third of school communities did not discuss the objectives at all, operating on the basis of traditions and 'common assumptions' instead.

In other words, objectives are neither considered in terms of school-specific needs and resources, nor together with peer supporters. This runs the risk that peer supporters' work fails to be sufficiently integrated into the school curriculum and that schools are unable to make use of the opportunities it offers to build well-being. If the role of peer supporters is only limited to doing concrete tasks, they might not be able to plan

their activities in a very focused manner. Without jointly agreed objectives, it is also difficult to evaluate and develop activities. It is revealing that many pupil welfare teams cite annually repeated traditions and routines as being one of the strengths of the scheme. While traditions and routines guarantee the stability of the scheme and are therefore important, the challenge here is to simultaneously bear in mind that peer support activities also need to be reformed in line with the present day and so as to meet the needs and objectives of peer supporters and other pupils.

PROPOSALS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Schools should link peer support activities more effectively as part of the whole school's well-being efforts and curriculum.
- Schools should make sure that all teachers are aware of the significance of peer support activities and make it possible for pupils to participate in the activities.
- Schools should set objectives for peer support activities together with peer supporters.
- Schools should cooperate with neighbouring schools, youth work services, parishes, MLL associations or other local parties, thus securing adequate support and resources for peer support activities.



Summary

The objectives of peer support activities are more or less in line across different schools and respondent groups. The activities conformed to the general goals set by the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare and the evaluation suggests that they are very successful, especially in supporting seventh-graders and improving the general school atmosphere. Peer support activities are perceived by school staff, peer supporters as well as eighth-graders to have plenty of positive effects.

The most common form of activity among peer supporters is supporting seventh-graders at the beginning of lower secondary school. Eighth-graders and peer supporters wish to see expansion and consolidation of activities. The main obstacles to development of activities appear to be peer support coordinators' lack of time and a teacher-driven school culture. Only 50% of schools involve peer supporters in defining objectives for their own activities, while many schools do not allow peer supporters to plan their activities independently at all.

The high appreciation enjoyed by peer support activities is manifested in the vast numbers of pupils interested in them. In view of supporting different kinds of pupils, it is important to select a diverse range of pupils as peer support-

ers and also to allow them to grow with the role. An equitable and careful selection procedure complete with adequate guidance play a significant role in promoting the success of activities.

Peer supporters are faced with plenty of expectations from school staff, eighth-graders as well as from themselves. The expectations are sometimes tough in relation to the training and guidance received by peer supporters. In terms of issues such as bullying, their role should be linked more closely to preventive activities instead of intervention in bullying. The evaluation and prior research¹ show that peer supporters can play a significant role in reducing bullying.

The status of peer support activities varies by school. In particular, there is variation in the extent to which the whole school community endorses and knows peer support activities and in the types of resources allocated to the scheme. The evaluation suggests that the status of peer support activities become the stronger, the more there are experiences and traditions concerning activities and the more the school makes use of MLL support.

Based on the results, schools that in-

vest in guidance and training for peer support activities have significantly better capacities to prevent bullying and loneliness. The positive effects of peer support activities are also visible in the assessments provided by eighth-graders in cases where enough time has been allocated to guidance and training of peer supporters. Allocation of sufficient resources to peer support activities may improve the opportunities of voluntary peer supporters to help and support other pupils in everyday school life. Peer supporters seem to have the will and potential to contribute extensively to pupils' well-being and to prevent development and aggravation of young people's problems. The results suggest that the support received by a school from the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare has a direct impact on the scope and quality of activities, prevention of problems as well as peer supporters' involvement and opportunities to influence.

Based on this evaluation, the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare has developed new quality criteria for peer support activities. Schools may use the quality criteria to evaluate and improve their own peer support schemes.

1 Cowie & Smith 2010, Cowie et al. 2008.

*Pupils would have the will
and potential to do even more.*

Quality criteria for peer support activities

The quality criteria set by the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare for peer support activities are based on the values and aims of the scheme defined by the League and on evaluation of peer support activities carried out in 2012.

The quality criteria help schools evaluate their own activities. The quality criteria for peer support activities have a significant bearing on the impact of peer support activities at a school.

Peer supporters

- Peer supporters receive sufficient training for their role, lasting at least 16 hours.
- Peer supporters participate in setting objectives for their own activities and draw up an action plan for the entire school year.
- Peer supporters convene regularly to plan their own activities.

Peer support coordinator

- The school has at least two peer support coordinators, who are committed to the role for a minimum period of two years.
- Peer support coordinators have taken the MLL basic training course for coordinators.
- Peer support coordinators participate in further training courses, seminars or meetings for coordinators at least every other year.
- Peer support coordinators have subscribed to the MLL newsletter and make use of MLL peer support materials.
- Peer support coordinators meet peer supporters on a regular basis and spend at least 1.5 hours of their working time on peer support activities every week.

Status of peer support activities at school

- The peer support scheme has been recorded in the school's curriculum, annual plan and anti-bullying plan.
- The school has specified the role of peer supporters in prevention of and intervention in bullying and informed the members of the school community of this.
- Peer support activities are visible and audible to school staff, pupils and parents. The school's pupils and staff know which pupils act as peer supporters.
- The school cooperates with the municipal youth services department, the local parish, the MLL local association or other parties in order to consolidate peer supporters' training and opportunities to influence.

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The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (MLL) has coordinated and developed peer support activities in Finnish schools since 1972. Nowadays, peer support is the most important form of the League's involvement with young people and schools, covering 90% of Finnish schools teaching the lower secondary grades of basic education. In 2012, the Mannerheim League carried out an evaluation of peer support activities. This summary report brings together the key results of the evaluation, proposals for improvement and the new quality criteria for peer support activities.

