

# Exams success at West Lothian school in face of tragedy

A Blackburn school which faced a torrent of online abuse after the tragic death of a pupil, and saw more than half of its buildings closed last year as a result of crumbling concrete, has still managed to outperform schools across Scotland.

St Kentigern's Academy in Blackburn, West Lothian, was engulfed in a [media storm](#) after the tragic death of 14-year old Hamdan Aslam in June last year. The tragic accidental death was whipped into a social media frenzy which had police deployed to protect pupils and staff.

Over the last year pupils have also had to cope with the closure of much of the estate, after the potentially dangerous RAAC aerated concrete was found to have been used in its construction.

In the same timeframe however its pupils produced some of the best exam results in Scotland, Headteacher Andrew Sharkey told Whitburn and Blackburn Local Area Committee.

Mr Sharkey told the meeting: "It has been a very challenging 18 months, I think it would be fair to say.

"We had the tragic death of a student, Hamdan, last June where he died of an undiagnosed heart defect, but as you'll be aware

the media and social media ran with a different take on that.

“That led at the time to real issues for the school and even after the official statement on the Friday that didn’t really stop the amount of challenges that the school had to face.”

Following a storm of rumours and allegations of bullying the school was besieged by phone calls, text and emails – some from 300 miles away threatening staff.

Police had to be deployed at the school long after the cause of the boy’s death was revealed by the family’s lawyer.

A Government report in December praised the school for the way it handled the tragedy and Mr Sharkey said the school was continuing to offer support to the pupils, and to staff members who had had to listen to stories of how the tragedy unfolded “two, three, up to 20 times, in one case.”

The school was already facing a huge logistical challenge of where to teach pupils since RAAC roof panels were first discovered in 2022.

Mr Sharkey delivered the latest update: “Just to keep us on our toes we now have 62 % of the school estate closed and we have a number of cabins operating as classrooms.”

He pointed out that exams have now had to be held in buildings such as the Blackburn Partnership as the school has lost its large social spaces.

However lessons go on, largely on site with temporary accommodation. Of all subjects only PE has to be delivered off site with pupils bussed to and from facilities for lessons.

Mr Sharkey said: “At no point did the school close. We continued teaching throughout. We don’t have social space in the school but we’ll continue to keep the school going and indeed succeeding in many ways.”

In fourth year 68.4% of students are getting five or more National fives, some 20 percent about the national comparator figures of pupils at similar schools across the country.

The students do really well specifically in sixth year. A third of those in sixth year got one or more advanced Higher last year, 18 students got an A in Advanced Higher History.

“That is the best in Scotland, It’s nationally significant,” Mr Sharkey told councillors. While the bulk of the school’s pupils leave in fourth year St Kent’s has long established relationships with local industry to offer routes to work as well as into further and higher education.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter

