

Submission prepared for:

**The Children and Young People's Committee Review of school attendance
and behaviour prepared by NAHT Cymru and ASCL Cymru.**

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Introduction

1. Thank you for inviting us to submit evidence to this Review
2. ASCL and NAHT represent the majority of school leaders in Wales.
3. The evidence the Committee has already heard from Professor Ken Reid largely reflects school leaders' views; we too regret the delay in implementing some of the recommendations of the 2008 NBAR report, such as those related to initial teacher training and training of the wider school workforce.
4. We acknowledge that the Welsh Government's 'Making a Difference on Behaviour and Attendance Action Plan 2011-2013' provides a coherent and evidence-based framework within which to operate.
5. School leaders have provided us with details of their own experience which we believe are indicative of schools' determination to tackle attendance and behaviour issues. We hope Committee members find them helpful. What we found could not be described as a consistent, national plan of action as envisaged by Professor Reid however. Many school interventions are effective and sharing these would be beneficial; other policy decisions and local factors are less helpful. We have attempted to give some examples below.

Attendance:

6. Training of NQTs and the wider school workforce on attendance issues is considered a neglected area by school leaders. Some have sought to address this by using school in service training days (INSET) to allow EWOs (Education Welfare Officers) to lead whole school training on the issue. This has been useful.
7. Practical issues have been resolved in this way too; for example, the importance of the register as a legal document and the requirement to use the codes accurately. Inaccurate recording may lead to inappropriate responses by the school or a failure to trigger necessary EWO/ESO involvement. The Welsh Government proposes to use parental fines in cases of persistent absenteeism. Though we are sceptical about Government proposals to introduce parental fines in such cases, we would point out that unless training issues are tackled seriously in relation to the keeping of the register, attempts to fine parents may be subject to successful challenge of records can be shown to be inaccurate.
8. If there is likely to be a permanent exclusion because of the severity of a particular incident, the local authority must be notified. Usually in such cases the local authority suggests home tuition or a move to another school (if school and parental agreement can be secured); this

- can be a lengthy process). Such solutions are not included in the authority's permanent exclusion figures but do adversely affect the attendance figures at the original school.
9. There is a concern that this may lead schools to avoid permanent exclusions even where circumstances warrant such action. This may not be entirely helpful because if a child's behaviour warrants exclusion but there is no record of it, it is very difficult to persuade the local authority, (without robust evidence of significant school intervention and provision which has been ineffective), to assist the school with more substantial and expert provision. The statementing process and access to behaviour specialist provision may be compromised.
 10. Members value highly the termly register audit completed by EWOs but the time it takes for the work to be completed for all schools impacts significantly and negatively on EWOs' ability to interact directly with vulnerable families. This speaks to another of Professor Ken Reid's concerns; that we have too few dedicated EWOs/ESOs in Wales. Even where schools maintain excellent practice, attendance may deteriorate without the necessary capacity to liaise directly with the school and conduct home visits.
 11. School leaders support a practice where families routinely meet with EWOs/AOs when pupils with a poor attendance record transfer to a new school. This helps to ensure sure that parents understand the attendance expectations of the new school. It is important that such good practice is not confined to individual schools but represents a consistent local authority policy, supported by excellent liaison with all parties.
 12. EWO services have undoubtedly increased their focus on tackling absenteeism by pupils. Swansea LA for example has operated a policy of publicly naming parents taken to court for failing in their duty to ensure attendance of their child at school.
 13. We recognise that the greater emphasis on pupil tracking and more forensic examination of data promoted by the School Standards Unit has been helpful with regard to attendance data despite continuing concerns about consistency outlined below. A good tracking mechanism is essential in dealing with attendance issues.
 14. Members report that the pupil deprivation grant (PDG) and the school effectiveness grant (SEG) have been a particularly important contributor to increased attendance rates. As Professor Ken Reid points out, absenteeism affects pupils from more disadvantaged backgrounds disproportionately; the pupil deprivation grant is of course specifically targeted at this group of pupils. One school whose percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals is nearly 50% has reported a dramatic improvement (2011/2012: **88.1%**; 2012/2013: **93.2%**)

in attendance figures, a drop in exclusion rates and an overall improvement in behaviour.

The school used the PDG and SEG to employ additional support staff to implement intervention strategies for literacy, numeracy and emotional / nurture issues; some of the funding has been used to buy resources to run enriched curriculum and after school activities.

15. Another school reported that a £5000 grant from the local authority had helped the school employ a part-time attendance officer. Attendance jumped from 84% to 92% as a result in the period 2005/6 to 2009/10, a position maintained in subsequent years. In the same school, the introduction of a 'nurture room' in the school for an individual pupil saw that pupil's attendance improve from 32% to 90% over a two-year period.
16. There is real concern however about how schools will be able to maintain the impetus of these initiatives (which rely upon additional staffing) when the grant fund streams are withdrawn. It would be naïve to suppose that schools would be able to afford to continue to employ these staff without long-term additional funds, and this in turn will have a negative impact upon attendance.
17. Other schools, particularly in the primary sector report very positive effects from the introduction of awards for children who maintain a good attendance record (bronze award certificate for 100% attendance at Christmas; silver award certificate at Easter; gold award certificate and prize in the summer for example). Children engage very happily in this process; one school reported that it frequently exceeds its 95% attendance target by employing these strategies. Schools may involve EWOs/AOs (Attendance Officers) in 'attendance rewards assemblies'; they then become very well known to all the children and are seen in a more positive light.
18. These strategies are all supported by greater engagement with parents via letters, newsletters, meetings and very swift communication with parents in cases of unreported or unauthorised absences.
19. Government interventions such as the drafting of more robust guidance on the importance of avoiding school-time absences for holidays have also been useful, even though in some cases this has led to difficult conversations with parents.
20. We acknowledge too the impact of the inclusion of attendance data in banding judgements; we believe however that this too may lack national consistency because some doubt remains whether all schools and local authorities report absences to a common format. Until this is resolved, a reliable all-Wales picture will be difficult to achieve.

21. Some local authorities have also given better and more consistent support on attendance issues in particular. One school leader from Carmarthenshire detailed the change in culture there:
- Noticeable changes have included:
 - o Improved guidance from the local authority;
 - o Local authority visits to individual schools. This is much appreciated because individual school concerns can be tackled e.g. correct use of codes.
 - o The LEA has an Estyn target to improve attendance levels. This has been given high priority.
 - o Schools have a duty to respond to an ‘attendance action plan’.
22. Less helpful in terms of determining the real nature of the attendance problem was a recent Government decision to reclassify study leave as ‘authorised absence’ rather than ‘education elsewhere’ and to advise that it should be limited to 15 days per annum. Study leave and five days illness would thus take a pupil into the category of pupils absent for 20.5 days or more. The justification for the decision, repeated in a recent communication to schools, is that some students are unable to make positive use of their time when their examinations have finished and would be better served by organised in-school activity. This is a classic case of affecting the majority because of issues affecting a minority. The experience of those schools that organised a programme of activities for the latter part of the summer term 2012 was that the majority of pupils voted with their feet and did not attend and thus decreased the school’s attendance rates. In one case, a secondary school in south east Wales that attempted to follow the ‘letter of the law’ on study leave, found that other schools had exploited legitimate loopholes to maintain attendance rates; its own attendance figures were suddenly severely compromised, leading to a ‘4’ classification in banding. This is a case of an unintended consequence that is at best unhelpful, and a worst grossly unfair.
23. Absentee figures can be affected by administrative decisions; when schools decide to close their register for example. Some schools do so earlier than others. Early closure of the register will identify persistent latecomers, triggering the involvement of an ESO/EWO and a formal record of an unauthorised absence; later closure may not do so though schools may make the decision for later closure for entirely legitimate practical reasons.

24. Anecdotal experience suggests that there has not been any noticeable change in the level of training in behaviour management for ITT trainees. Schools continue to address behaviour management 'on the job' via in-house professional studies programmes. This inevitably leads to variations across schools. That said, this is to be expected as each school would train its intake of ITT trainees in the systems that that school operates.
25. It is probably fair to state that the publication of the Handbook "Practical Approaches to Behaviour Management" has had minimal impact in schools. At 170 pages it is far too long to be a practical document for busy classroom teachers. Most schools will have made copies available to staff, but it is more than likely that the majority of copies are gathering dust on staffroom shelves. To make a real impact we would suggest that the Welsh Government consider a range of new approaches, as detailed below.
26. Many of the approaches suggested within the guidance are well thought through, and would have the complete support of school leaders. However, they need to be extracted from a lengthy and rather daunting formal document and distributed in digestible chunks to staff, possibly in the form of regular fliers which most schools could distribute as emails.
27. School leaders are often dismayed by the paucity of responses by newly qualified teachers at interview to questions about classroom. In response to questions about how to maintain order, the stock response is often 'to follow the school's discipline code', and further questioning frequently reveals a lack of real understanding. While school leaders will not expect NQTs to display great experience, we would suggest that this is an area to which teacher training institutions should devote greater resources.
28. If the Welsh Government views improving behaviour in schools as a priority, it needs to make financial resources available to schools to provide regular training for teachers and the wider school staff. In one school, the decision of the senior leadership team to devote a whole day to staff training on this issue involved hiring in an external speaker at a cost to the school in excess of £1,000. Whilst this is good use of resources, and works out at a cost of less than £80 per member of staff, it is easy to see that such an intervention may not continue to be possible in an environment where funds are under increasing pressure. A small financial incentive to the school to undertake regular training of this sort could have a major impact across the country.

29. One of the main concerns of classroom teachers with regard to behaviour is the increasing level of defiance shown by students, backed up by parents, when children are challenged about inappropriate comments or unacceptable disruption (often low-level) to lessons. Parents frequently refuse to support the school in the imposition of sanctions, and significant amounts of staff time are wasted having to attempt to negotiate with parents who are unwilling to accept that their child must recognise his/her responsibilities in this regard. Younger, less experienced members of staff find these situations particularly difficult; this can lead to significant stress. We do not have a 'magic bullet' to recommend, but feel it important to raise it as a major contributory factor that is of genuine concern in many schools.
30. There is still a lack of joined-up action between education professionals and others, particularly in relation to Looked-After children. Teachers frequently experience significant frustration about managing the behaviour of vulnerable children when professionals from social and mental health services are hard to contact and harder to persuade to take action. This is often due to a system where there is no one single point of contact tasked with dealing with all responses to specific schools. In a few cases in schools around Swansea, councils have set up systems that enable this, and it has proved to be very effective. However, in the majority of cases, teachers find that when they phone social services they speak to a different person each time, or get no further than a 'help-desk' which is frequently less than helpful. The person they eventually speak to probably has no knowledge of the case, and action is further delayed. There is a real case for requiring all social and mental health service providers to identify names officers to deal with, and build relationships with child protection officers at schools, so that personal, long-term relationships are established, and schools that have significant behavioural issues with very vulnerable children can have reliable contact with someone they know will understand the context of the individual child and their needs.
31. Arrangements for safeguarding are largely undertaken by Local Authorities on behalf of schools. This system allows schools to focus on their work of delivering education in the classroom, and is generally effective. Different LAs have different approaches to the matter of updating CRB checks, with most content that, once a member of staff has been cleared upon first being engaged for employment, this is sufficient. The current charges for CRB checking mean that both councils and individual schools are unwilling to spend the money to engage in three yearly checks in the current climate of limited financial resources.

32. With regard to students who are EOTAS (Educated Otherwise than at School), there are significant variations across LAs in rates of EOTAS pupils with Swansea having the highest rate at 4.3 per 1000. LAs, via the EWO service, have expressed concern at variations in the hours during which EOTAS pupils are expected to formally attend establishments, whilst officially remaining in full-time education. Ironically in the light of concerns about attendance, EOTAS students are recorded as having 100% attendance at their 'home school' as students who are being Educated Elsewhere'.

Support to pupils with ALN in respect of behaviour and attendance

33. The delegation of budgets to schools, as part of the move to 85% delegation, will have inevitably increased variation in how schools deploy resources, with many adopting the grouping of pupils with ALN (Additional Learning Needs), within mainstream settings, in order to maximise the efficacy of TA support. Budget delegation has not been universally supported by the parents of pupils with ALN.

Joint Working with Agencies

34. The major concern here would be on cuts to funding for proven programmes, with reduced capacity to benefit pupils. Certain programmes such as Exchange Counselling have been implemented in the last few years and appear to be contributing to wellbeing. However, other programmes such as Family Group Conferencing in Swansea have been highly effective in recent years, but face challenges in maintaining services in the face of funding cuts.

Conclusion

35. We hope that you find this information useful. We have attempted to describe the complexity of the issues; also schools' determination to tackle them effectively and sensitively. There is no consistent national approach to this. There are targets but concentrating solely on targets may not have the desired result; schools, local authorities and families need the support and intervention that reflect the needs of individual children. We need consistent reporting too and we are some way from achieving it; but problems affecting young people's lives will not be solved simply by recording their presence or absence at school.