

ECAD6009/7003

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|                 | <b>Target</b>                                                                                                                                 | <b>What I have done in this assignment...</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Target 1</b> | Ensure all points in your literature reviews are backed with references. Avoid making sweeping statements that cannot be backed by literature | As seen by the reference list for this assignment, I have made a vast effort to conduct as much research as possible. Not only have I discussed a wide body of legislation, but I have also supported all of my evaluations with appropriate research |
| <b>Target 2</b> | Sometimes your writing steers away from being academic and critical to more of a narrative style.                                             | In this assignment, I tried to structure my work more formally, using subtitles to avoid this happening again. I have also proofread my work, using the website recommended by the marker of my previous assignment.                                  |

Following some of the first guidance published by the Welsh Government in 2014, School Improvement Plans (SIP), otherwise known as School Development Plans (SDP), were introduced with hopes of achieving a “self-improving education system” that, as a result, produces “clever, skilled, happy and healthy” individuals in Wales (Welsh Government, 2014 p.5). The main purpose of an SDP, as discussed in this assignment, is to formulate a strategic plan, using both short and long-term evidence bases, such as Estyn inspections, to improve the outcomes for learners by tackling challenging targets individually identified by schools (Welsh Government, 2014). Furthermore, recently published guidance by ESTYN, in line with the new Curriculum for Wales, additionally identifies a further 10 aspects of guidance for schools to follow whilst creating their SDP, including ‘self-evaluation and improvement planning’ to ‘family and community engagement’ (ESTYN, 2022). The development plan discussed in this assignment is taken from an English-medium school based in Neath Port-Talbot. The school is responsible for 179 pupils, 24.1% of whom receive free school meals, with an additional 12.4% being identified as having a form of Additional Learning Needs (ALN) (ESTYN, 2022 p.1). After reading the school development plan, I have specifically chosen to focus on one of the four targets which they identified, raising student attendance. This assignment aims to evaluate the success of measures implemented by the school to achieve their target, using both Government guidance and further research to guide my evaluation.

## **Literature Review**

Dating back to 2011, the Welsh Curriculum has often faced scrutiny due to the considerably low Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores in comparison to neighboring countries such as England and Scotland (OECD, 2014). The blame low results were causally drawn to the higher rates of poverty, with statistics showing an almost 10% higher rate in comparison to England (Welsh Government, 2022). Consequently, Wales strived to decrease the impact of this deprivation on student performance by introducing policies such as; “measurable objectives”, “long-term measurable visions” and innovative “educational strategies” in the 2011 educational reform (OECD, 2014). Fast forward to the most recent Welsh Curriculum reform in 2022, schools have been encouraged to aspire to achieve the status of a

'learning organisation' (SLO), that improves outcomes for learners through recognition of the 'four purposes' (OECD,2018). Research has suggested that schools that operate as 'learning organisations' adapt more adequately to internal and external changes, such as those outlined by school's SDP's, showing an increased positive relationship with both student outcomes and staff efficacy (OECD,2018).

Upon reflection of the guidance published by the Welsh Government over the past 10 years, it's interesting to see the aim to implement "long-term school improvement", an aspect that maintains high prevalence even in the 2022 curriculum reform, has been a continuous aim since the publishing of the 2009 PISA results (OECD, 2014: HWB, 2024). Even in the most recent 2022 PISA result publication, Wales scored significantly below the OECD average across subject area, again suggesting a so far subsequent failure in achieving the aim of 'long-term improvement' (Welsh Government, 2023). On the contrary, it could be suggested that the benefits of the new curriculum are yet to become apparent through test scores, such as that of PISA. Moreover, an alternative conclusion behind the poor results can be drawn to standardised testing "no longer supporting the ethos of the Curriculum", with progression steps and assessments being tailored to the learners (Welsh Gov, 2024). These new aims of 'personalisation' outlined by the curriculum are reflective of the introductory purpose of an SDP, to benefit that individual school according to their personal targets.

## **Developing a plan**

Adhering to the Welsh Government (2022) guidance, each school should develop an individual improvement plan. The school at the forefront of this assignment formulates their development plan based off a 'Self-Evaluation Report' (SER), that subsequently alters each year dependent on how the yearly targets have been achieved. For this self-evaluation to be successful, the school must consider a range of evidence, sourced from various sources (Welsh Government, 2024). The school in discussion successfully adheres to this guidance, identifying their four whole-school targets based off their most recent ESTYN inspections and internal self-evaluation techniques (such as 'book-looks', internal observations, pupil-voice feedback). The methodology behind the Self-Evaluation Report and the documentation of such techniques are

held to greatest importance in order for the SDP targets to be successfully achieved (Welsh Government, 2024) Furthermore, the Government guidance emphasises the importance of using evidence-based approaches when implementing new practices, in hopes of achieving the SDP aims and the importance continuously assessing these approaches in action by using the yearly SER (Welsh Government, 2024). Throughout, variables such as the differences in learner's progression and wellbeing should be of upmost importance during the final consideration of what methods will be most effective in achieving the targets identified by the SDP (Welsh Government, 2024).

The purpose of an improvement plan is to overall benefit the learners through achieving the aims outlined by that individual school. Following the Welsh Government guidance (2024), all SDPs should be published in a way suitable for learners and stakeholders, this including; governors, parents, and staff members. Throughout the most recent curriculum reform, the emphasis on 'stakeholders' has vastly increased, with hopes of achieving the Government's target of 'self-efficacy' for school's through the additional resources, information, and opportunities and wisdom stakeholders can offer (OECD, 2018; Alomes, 2023). Again, this is successfully adhered to by the school in discussion, who additionally publishes all documentation in 'child speak' (for example, "our teachers encourage all pupils to attend school"). Furthermore, the school successfully maintains these relationships with stakeholders through sharing advances towards, or changes, in aims via the school newsletter, noticeboards and social media platforms. The school successfully acknowledges the differences between stakeholders so they still produces physical, as well as online, copies of newsletters and notices to ensure that all stakeholders have equal access to progress updates.

## **Developing an Action Point: Attendance**

At the start of the 2023/24 school year, due to the previous academic year's SER's conclusions, the school outlined four key improvement targets. One of the four targets being to 'improve all pupil attendance, focusing on those pupils eligible for free school meals' (EFSM). On the whole, Neath Port Talbot Council (NPTC) (2024) iterates the figure of 95% to be

considered good attendance, however, it is still emphasised that students should aim for 100% where possible.

Students eligible for FSM have often been known to display lower school attendance rates (Rogers, 2024 p. 16). The lower rates of attendance amongst these children conveys the “wider challenges” faced by people in poverty (Westwater, 2021), with the same children showing both an increased likelihood of becoming socially isolated and failing to continue to higher education (NPTC, 2024). Furthermore, those children showing persistent absenteeism are almost 50% less likely to achieve the “higher standard” grades achieved by their peers in KS2 (Long & Rodgers, 2024, pp. 22) as result of their absences. To promote consistent attendance, schools must adopt a consistent, dynamic and positive approach to attendance, encouraging the involvement of parents/carers, and acknowledging signs of persistent unattendance in a timely manner (NPTC, 2024). When discussing attendance, it is also important to consider the ongoing effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic, with children’s absence levels doubling in comparison to that pre-pandemic (Senedd Cymru, 2023). Despite difficulty drawing direct conclusions, there is great evidence to suggest that both parent and pupil’s mental health issues come as result of the lockdowns. Both anxieties induced by aspects of school life, such as exams and structured routines, and additionally the rise in health anxiety can be blamed for the increased persistent absences across the UK (Long & Rogers 2024 pp. 18; Senedd Cymru, 2023). Upon reflection, this persistent absenteeism could be another potential factor contributing to Wales’ low scores in the most recent publishing of PISA results due to prolonged negative side effects of missing so much education.

Despite the blanket aim of 95% attendance, the school in discussion has a specific aim to overall achieve 93.2% attendance come the end of the 23/24 academic year (as advised by the Welsh Government 2014 guidelines). Each term attendance is revised by the acting head teacher through spreadsheets, looking at students according to year group, gender and FSM allocation. Pupils receiving FSM attendance had dropped from 94.8% (2018/19) to 90.6% in 2022/23, possibly a result of the pandemic given the prevalence of deprivation in the school community. The school has acknowledged this decrease as having an impact on pupil progress and wellbeing within school, hence the aim to improve statistics to meet the standards of the local authority.

## **Making Improvements**

The school SDP clearly outlines all actions taken to improve pupil attendance, dividing their actions into; 'communication with stakeholders', 'targeting pupils and families' and 'sharing good practice'. The school places strong focuses on rewarding children for their improved attendance, using retrospective awards such as individual certificates and 'raffle ticket' entries to a half term prize draw. Within the school, both staff and children find this to be a beneficial method to raise the level of attendance. The usage of Retrospective awards is generally most effective as they promote intrinsic motivation and sense of autonomy as they are unaware of their performance until they receive the reward (Rodgers, 2018 as cited by Mcfarlane, 2023). On the other hand, offering such rewards, such as certificates and prizes, has been under scrutiny for many years. Researchers such as Sparks (2019) found that students offered awards for improving their attendance, prior to improving it, did not show any motivation to do so. Additionally, those students who were rewarded for their attendance as a result of unincentivised improvement, showed a two percent reduced likelihood of maintaining that attendance going forward (Sparks, 2019). Moreover, the ethics of providing such awards has also been questioned, with poor attendance of children at such young ages being blamed on the parents as opposed to children (Tayler, 2022).

Furthermore, the school targets families through implementation of the local authority's RAG (red, amber, green) system. The school issues termly letters for parents and guardians, reporting pupils' attendance on a slip coloured in accordance with the RAG system and the child's attendance score. As supported by the authority, research by Rogers (2018) and colleges further supports the use of these "attendance nudge letters", finding them to be one of the most effective motivators to get students back to school. However, the ALNCO who discussed the SDP with us completely disagreed, sharing her experiences of parent's completely disregarding the letters. The individual school's findings alternatively support Government research findings, suggesting parents wish to receive physical letters about formal issues (GOV.UK, 2024). Parents would prefer to be notified of less important issues, such as attendance, to be sent via email or text (GOV.UK, 2024). Upon reflection, the nature of students being presented a boldly coloured letter to give parents every term could again raise ethical concerns, leaving those children with poor attendance feeling embarrassed in front of their peers over an issue which may be out of their control.

An alternative suggestion in promoting greater advances towards the school achieving their attendance target could be to increase involvement and develop relationships with parents. As

suggested by the Welsh Government's Young Wales framework (2011), involving the Education Welfare Service (EWS) to develop positive relationships with parents through additional interactions such as coffee mornings, is an alternative way to achieve positive outcomes. The EWS within NPTC specifically works to promote school policies through working within the school and community using advice given upon results of previous good practice (NPTC, 2024). Developing positive parent-school relationships has shown many benefits including increased attendance and school attainment (Hernandez, 2022 pp. 9). A potential suggestion could be alternatively emphasising the negative side effects of poor attendance rates, such as decreased social development, as opposed to emphasising the percentage of student's attendance, which is often already known to parents (Fothergill, 2023). Additionally, once identifying the signs of persistent absenteeism, it is important that the both the school and EWS acknowledge the differences and individuality of that child and their family's needs, personalising the communication and partnership appropriately when possible (Axford et al, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this assignment was to review the current guidelines and publications surrounding SDPs, and to critically evaluate how the chosen school addresses an identified target. Overall, the school successfully adheres to the guidelines outlined by the most recent curriculum reform, making full attempts to achieve the status of an SLO (Welsh Government, 2024). Moreover, the school has successfully identified relevant targets by using a range of sources (as suggested by the Welsh Government guidelines in 2022) such as ESTYN reports and internal evaluations such as their SER, implementing a variety of methodology to achieve them. Attendance is a vast concept that presents a range of challenges that can be difficult to address such as poverty (Westwater, 2021), and mental health challenges relating to both students and parents (Long & Roberts, 2024). This assignment also shown, is that there is not one method that suits all schools when attempting to improve their targets such as attendance. What some research findings might suggest about one school, such as retrospective attendance awards having a demotivating effect (Rogers, 2018), may not be applicable for

others, such as the school at the forefront of this assignment, where rewards such as certificates are successfully implemented.

As a result of this assignment and my findings, I will continue my professional development by contributing towards the achievement of SDP targets where possible. Having an understanding of a school's targets will allow adaptation of my teaching practice where possible to improve targets, such as attendance, ensuring I prioritise my work with relevant partners and children to achieve this. This assignment has also reiterated the importance of individuality and developing a greater understanding of individuals I am working with to achieve an overall aim, such as increased attendance. The barrier one child may face to education, such as poverty at home (Westwater, 2021), may not be the same as another child whose parents suffer with extreme health anxiety (Long & Rogers, 2024 pp. 18)

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## Appendix

Fig.1: An example of how the school shares targets with learners through use of 'child speak'.



Our teachers allow us  
to learn about our  
country, our language  
and what makes Wales  
so special.

They help us to use  
the Welsh language  
confidently in school  
and in our community.

There are 6 thinking skills  
- remembering,  
understanding, analysing,  
applying, evaluating and  
creating.

Our teachers help us  
all develop our  
thinking skills and  
share our ideas.

We write the different  
higher order thinking skills  
in different colours in our  
learning objectives to  
show that we are using  
them in our work.