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Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

Effective practice in tackling poverty and disadvantage in schools

November 2012

Iechyd ar Waith

Health at Work

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The purpose of Estyn is to inspect quality and standards in education and training in Wales. Estyn is responsible for inspecting:

- nursery schools and settings that are maintained by, or receive funding from, local authorities;
- primary schools;
- secondary schools;
- special schools;
- pupil referral units;
- independent schools;
- further education;
- independent specialist colleges;
- adult community learning;
- local authority education services for children and young people;
- teacher education and training;
- work-based learning;
- careers companies; and
- offender learning.

Estyn also:

- provides advice on quality and standards in education and training in Wales to the National Assembly for Wales and others; and
- makes public good practice based on inspection evidence.

Foreword

There continue to be too many children in Wales living in poverty[1] and Wales' new Child Poverty Strategy for Wales[2] reaffirms the Welsh Government's commitment to eradicate child poverty by 2020. The link between disadvantage and educational underachievement is still strong. In general, learners from poorer families do not achieve as well as their peers. Schools have a key role to play and serving all learners equally is not enough – there needs to be a specific focus on those children and young people who are growing up in poverty.

In my last Annual Report I drew attention to some of the challenges that schools still face in raising the achievement of disadvantaged. There is no single explanation for why learners from disadvantaged backgrounds perform less well than their peers and there is no single easy solution. Schools that tackle the impact of disadvantage use a range of approaches and interventions to address a complex set of problems. In the Annual Report, I also highlighted what a few effective schools in challenging circumstances do well. They analyse data on pupils' progress, they offer a tailored curriculum, and there is mentoring by staff and pupils.

This good practice report describes the characteristics of good practice and illustrates them in case studies from effective schools in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage.

This report is the second in a series produced in response to the Minister's annual remit to Estyn for 2011-2012. These reports look at how schools in Wales are tackling child poverty and disadvantage to improve learners' achievement and wellbeing. The first report[3] focused on the effectiveness of partnership working and community focused schooling. I hope that this good practice report and case studies will help practitioners to:

- raise pupils' standards of achievement by using best practice case studies to help to address the effects of poverty and disadvantage;
- identify and celebrate their strengths in providing for disadvantaged pupils;
- identify areas where there is room for improvement;
- make decisions about how to improve; and
- develop good practice.

I hope that this report and the case studies stimulate debate and support your planning to improve outcomes for disadvantaged learners across Wales.

Ann Keane

Ann Keane
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales

[1] Research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation states that 200,000 children are in poverty in Wales (Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Wales, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2011)

[2] Child Poverty Strategy for Wales (Information document No: 095/2011)

[3] Tackling poverty and disadvantage in schools: working with the community and other partners, Estyn 2011

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1

What do we know about disadvantaged learners?

The Welsh Wellbeing Monitor reports that children and young people growing up in poverty are vulnerable in a number of different ways. They are more at risk of poor educational attainment, are more likely to have poorer health outcomes, and have lower skills and aspirations. They are also more likely to be low paid, unemployed and welfare dependent in adulthood.

Studies on child poverty tell us that:

- the gap between children from richer and poorer backgrounds widens especially quickly during primary school. Disadvantaged children in primary schools are more likely to lack ambition and self-esteem, and to have behavioural problems and difficulty relating to their peers[5];
- boys as young as nine in disadvantaged schools become disenchanted with school and start to disengage; and
- children in disadvantaged schools have limited access to music, art and out-of-school activities that children in advantaged schools generally take for granted.

We also know that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds:

- are more likely to have a poor attendance record;
- often perceive the curriculum as irrelevant;
- are less likely to accept the school culture;
- are more likely to have additional learning needs;
- have parents who are less likely to be involved in their children's education;
- have parents who are more likely to have a negative perception and experience of school and education;
- are less healthy;
- are more likely to be not in employment, education or training;
- are more likely to have a child in their teenage years; and
- in the case of white working class boys, are less likely to achieve their potential than any other group[6].

Research also tells us that disadvantaged learners are more likely to do well at GCSE if the young person:

- has a belief in his/her own ability at school;
- believes that events result primarily from his/her own behaviour and actions;
- finds school worthwhile;
- thinks it is likely that he/she will apply to, and get into, higher education;
- avoids risky behaviour such as frequent smoking, cannabis use, anti-social behaviour, truancy, suspension and exclusion; and
- does not experience bullying[7].

[4] Welsh Government Wellbeing Monitor 2011

[5] The impact of poverty on young children's experience of school JRF, Goretti Horgan, University of Ulster 2007

[6] Joseph Rowntree Foundation studies 2006-2010

[7] The importance of attitudes and behaviour for poorer children's educational attainment,edited by Alissa Goodman, Institute for Fiscal Studies, and Paul Gregg, CMPO, University of Bristol JRF 2010

What do effective schools in challenging circumstances do well?

The Welsh Government's child poverty strategy sets out the vision and strategic objectives for reducing child poverty. However, there is no national programme for schools to follow for tackling issues of poverty and disadvantage. In general, learners who are disadvantaged by poverty do not achieve as well as their more advantaged peers. A few schools in challenging circumstances tackle poverty and disadvantage effectively and improve disadvantaged learners' standards and wellbeing. These schools employ a range of strategies specifically designed to meet the characteristic needs of disadvantaged learners.

Schools in challenging circumstances that raise the achievement of disadvantaged learners do what all successful schools do to secure the achievement of learners. In addition, they also create an outstandingly positive ethos that allows disadvantaged learners to achieve well. These schools employ strategies specifically to combat the factors that disadvantage learners. Effective schools in challenging circumstances:

1. take a whole-school, strategic approach to tackling disadvantage – they have a structured, coherent and focused approach to raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners;
2. use data to track the progress of disadvantaged learners – they gather information from a range of sources and use it to analyse the progress of groups of learners;
3. focus on the development of disadvantaged learners' literacy and learning skills;
4. develop the social and emotional skills of disadvantaged learners – they understand the relationship between wellbeing and standards and often restructure their pastoral care system to deal more directly with the specific needs of disadvantaged learners;
5. improve the attendance, punctuality and behaviour of disadvantaged learners – they have suitable sanctions, but find that reward systems work particularly well;
6. tailor the curriculum to the needs of disadvantaged learners – they have mentoring systems that guide learners through their programmes of study and help them to plan their own learning pathways;
7. make great efforts to provide enriching experiences that more advantaged learners take for granted – they offer a varied menu of clubs, activities and cultural and educational trips;
8. listen to disadvantaged learners and provide opportunities for them to play a full part in the school's life – they gather learners' views about teaching and learning, give learners a key role in school development, and involve learners directly to improve standards;
9. engage parents and carers of disadvantaged learners – they communicate and work face-to-face to help them and their children to overcome barriers to learning; and
10. develop the expertise of staff to meet the needs of disadvantaged learners – they have a culture of sharing best practice, provide opportunities for teachers to observe each other, and have performance management targets that are related to raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners.

Local authorities and the Welsh Government also have a key role in supporting schools to develop their practice in these 10 key areas. Each of these 10 elements of good practice is explored in more detail in this report. They are illustrated with case studies, which help to capture how effective schools raise the standards and wellbeing of disadvantaged learners.

1 Taking a whole-school, strategic approach to tackling disadvantage

In 2011, we found that schools that raise the achievement of disadvantaged learners understand well the needs of these learners and the potential barriers to their progress in learning. We found that many headteachers believed that tackling disadvantage was implicit in their planning. However, schools that successfully raise the achievement of disadvantaged learners take a strategic and systematic approach to tackling the issues of poverty and disadvantage. This approach includes an explicit plan, with focused and quantifiable targets for achievement, and detailed operational proposals.

Successful schools emphasise raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners in their strategic planning. There is a consistent reference in school policy documents to tackling poverty and disadvantage. They have specific and measurable targets to improve outcomes for disadvantaged learners. In this way, these schools have a structured, cohesive and focused approach to raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners.

Effective schools in challenging circumstances use a range of strategies that particularly suit their individual context. They introduce processes that are targeted at the particular needs of the disadvantaged learners in their schools. The strength of their planning is that the strategies are interrelated and provide an holistic, whole school approach to tackling the key issues that affect disadvantaged learners.

These schools have a clear vision and provide a sense of direction that leaves no one in any doubt about what the school needs to achieve. The schools usually have a motto or mission statement that they use to unite staff, learners, parents and governors in a view of the school that addresses issues of disadvantage positively.

In many cases, all stakeholders have participated in developing this 'vision statement'. These schools consult parents and pupils regularly to ensure that that the vision is developed across the whole school. The statement encapsulates the principles and beliefs that underpin every aspect of school life. The statement is used consistently in all policy documents, and drives the structure and content of teaching and learning. Leaders, staff, governors and learners refer routinely to the statement in their work. This helps to create a coherent, positive and dynamic ethos in the school. It also helps to maintain a strong focus on tackling poverty and disadvantage, high achievement for all, mutual support and a respect for diversity.

These successful schools have robust performance management arrangements in place to review their progress against their targets and planned actions to tackle poverty and disadvantage. The individual performance targets for staff in the school reflect the whole school vision and targets in relation to raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners.

2 Using data to track the progress of disadvantaged learners

In our 2011 report, we found that most schools do not target support specifically at disadvantaged learners and only a few schools have effective mechanisms to do so. Generally, schools are better at identifying and supporting low-performing learners, whether they are disadvantaged or not.

Many of the successful primary schools in this survey emphasise the importance of gaining information about disadvantaged learners as early as possible, ideally before children start formal education. A few schools make home visits to disadvantaged families before nursery-age children start school. This means that they are able to accommodate the specific needs of learners when they start school.

Ysgol Melyd in Denbighshire has a playgroup on its site that provides the school with useful information. The local authority's Early Years Intervention Team works closely with this school to provide vital targeted language support for needy learners at an early stage in their development.

Most schools have effective systems to track the progress of learners. In our 2011 report, we found that they do not use their tracking systems well enough to focus on the specific needs of disadvantaged learners, such as poor self-esteem and lack of aspiration, or to monitor their progress.

The most effective schools have robust internal systems to gather information about their disadvantaged learners. They also liaise effectively with external agencies to give them a good understanding of the needs of individual learners.

Successful schools also share this information well with staff, learners and parents. Teachers use the information given to them to plan and track progress. Learners use it themselves to actively to track their own progress.

Schools that are most successful in tackling poverty and disadvantage have data systems that:

- use a range of information, both quantitative and qualitative, including that on learners' wellbeing and perceptions;
- use external benchmarks to measure their progress against other schools;
- allow the school to track individuals and groups of learners;
- enable the school to monitor interventions at regular intervals so that, if strategies are not resulting in learners' improvement, they are reviewed, refined or abandoned;
- allow the school to monitor the performance of teachers, so that they may be better supported to improve the outcomes for groups or individuals; and
- link closely to mentoring processes and support the progress of groups and individuals.

This effective use of data to track pupils' outcomes and target support is illustrated in case studies 1 and 2 below.

case study 1

Cwrt Sart Community Comprehensive School in Neath Port Talbot has designed a system of profiling to track learners' progress at key stage 4.

Context of the school

Cwrt Sart Community Comprehensive School is an 11-16 community school in Briton Ferry, Neath Port Talbot. There are currently 500 learners on roll.

Overall, the catchment draws from a number of socially disadvantaged areas and 34% of learners are entitled to free school meals. Half of the learners in Year 7 are entitled to free school meals. The school has two community first partnerships within its catchment. Twenty-four per cent of learners have additional learning needs.

Strategy

Cwrt Sart's school aim is to "enable each individual to reach his/her full potential within a framework of high expectations". Part of the school's strategy to improve the outcomes for disadvantaged learners is to:

- reduce the variation in performance between subjects and groups of learners;
- analyse data effectively to set challenging targets and to track the progress of subject areas, individual learners and key groups of learners; and
- embed systematic target-setting and tracking processes.

Actions

Identification

The school identifies learners in the Year 11 cohort who are: eligible for free school meals; looked-after children; more able and talented; learners who require speech and language support; and hearing impaired learners.

Each learner has a profile. These profiles use the above information and a variety of academic data, including Fischer Family Trust (FFT) data and information from the Cognitive Ability Tests (CATs). This baseline data is used to allocate learners to a 'school band'. There are seven bands and each has a minimum expectation of performance. For example, if a learner is in band 5 their minimum expected performance at key stage 4 is to achieve a GCSE 'C' grade or equivalent. At key stage 3, the school expects that every learner will achieve a minimum of level 5. This target is reviewed twice a year during whole-school target setting and adjusted to build in challenge for learners, where necessary.

At the end of Year 10, subject teachers provide an estimated grade for each learner, which is fed into the 'learner profile'. This is used to identify learners who are underachieving in any particular subject areas. This information forms the basis of the coaching groups formed for Year 11, which contain approximately six learners. The more able and talented learners are placed in a separate group. Learners who are underachieving in English or mathematics are placed in a specific core subject coaching group of 10 learners. Any learners who are looked after by the local authority or entitled to free school meals are cross referenced with these initial groups so that additional individual support can be given to these learners. Learners with speech and language and hearing impairment are coached by specialised staff.

Forty per cent of Year 11 learners are coached in this way, with an additional 11% having coaching via the Reaching Wider scheme in association with Swansea University.

These learner profiles are shared with all members of staff to allow for a coherent system of support.

Coaching process

Seven members of staff, five of whom are trained as learning coaches, have a session to work with their mentees every fortnight. They work with individuals or with a group of learners, using a variety of strategies to meet specific needs. When needed, coaches work with subject teachers to develop further strategies. In mathematics, a 'peer mentoring' scheme is running in some classes for learners who feel less confident about numeracy. Literacy is developed with the more able and talented group through a debating society, which was set up in liaison with the literacy co-ordinator and culminating in a video submitted by the learners to a BBC Question Time competition.

Evaluation

The profiling system allows staff to refine strategies to tackle underachievement. When mock examination results are fed into the system, coaches reflect on the success of various strategies, and consider how to alter approaches and ways to share good practice.

Learners complete a questionnaire at the start of each term that asks them to rate aspects of their self-esteem, confidence and goal-setting. Staff analyse the responses after the first term review and present their findings in graphical form. The graph indicates the percentage of students who identified positive development within each specific question area.

Through evaluation the school has found that:

- although formative questionnaires provide a snapshot of how learners' personal feelings about themselves have changed, teachers need to find out more about why learners feel this change has happened; and
- the profiling process allocates time and support for learners to identify their own areas of weakness, develop strategies to overcome them and reflect on how else they can use these skills. The school is planning to build extra time for this personal and social education programme for Year 11 next year.

Outcomes

Learners who are entitled to free school meals achieve well in Cwrt Sart. Over the last few years, they have achieved better results than those in similar schools. In 2011, 31% of free-school-meal-learners achieved the level 2 threshold including English and mathematics, which was higher than the average performance of learners entitled to free school meals across Wales (22%).

Attendance levels have placed the school in the top 25% of similar schools for the last five years.

case study 2

Llwynypia Primary School in Rhondda Cynon Taf uses data collection and a process that tracks learners' progress in wellbeing and academic performance.

Context of the school

Llwynypia Primary School, with 208 learners aged three to 11 years of age, serves the village of Llwynypia in Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Most of the pupils who attend the school come from the immediate area. The area is described as being one of the most deprived in Wales as measured by the Welsh Index of Deprivation. Twenty-six per cent of pupils are entitled to free school meals. Thirty-four per cent of learners have special educational needs.

Strategy

The school and the school's aims and values reflect the development of the whole child. The school ethos is based on the wellbeing of all learners and staff, and the school motto, "We all believe, we all achieve!" is evident throughout the school. To ensure effective support for its disadvantaged learners, the school has developed a systematic approach to developing learners' wellbeing.

Actions

Staff worked in groups to identify the current provision for wellbeing across the school. Learners then undertook the same process.

Staff have devised a tracking system to monitor wellbeing across the school. Teachers assess learners' wellbeing and participation in all areas of learning. They then use a traffic light system to highlight learners who need a detailed assessment of needs. Staff then assess individual learners based on how much support they need in different areas including, for example, their sensitivity to the needs of others and their ability to express their emotions. The tracking system allows staff to evaluate learners' wellbeing and to support learners when necessary. School support strategies include counselling programmes and referral to specialist services.

The school has worked with other schools from its cluster to develop this approach further and agree a cluster policy. All of the schools involved use the Pupil Attitude to Self and School (PASS) survey, alongside the school identification system, to improve wellbeing across the cluster and within schools. This system provides a consistent approach to support the emotional and wellbeing needs of disadvantaged learners by identifying issues that might have a detrimental effect on learning. By collating both sets of data, the school can refine its target-setting and strategies for supporting the learning of disadvantaged learners.

The wellbeing tracking is linked to academic tracking systems and is used to inform differentiated learning and teaching. Achievement is tracked from nursery to Year 6 and is reviewed regularly. The school tracks the achievement of groups of learners (learners entitled to free school meals, those with English as an additional language, learners with additional learning needs and more able and talented learners) and their attendance, and identifies trends across groups of learners. Staff have class profiles in their planning files and these provide an overview of learners and the support they receive.

The cluster of schools works together effectively to ensure smooth transition for learners. Information about learners' wellbeing and levels of participation, as well as levels of attainment, are transferred to the secondary school at the end of key stage 2. Staff from both schools meet to discuss any individual needs.

Evaluation

Staff review learners' progress regularly. They monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of intervention strategies on a termly basis. Staff check wellbeing tracking regularly and evaluate the impact of strategies such as mentoring programmes. Listening to learners is an integral part of the school monitoring and self-evaluation process.

Outcomes

At key stage 2, performance in the core subjects has improved significantly over the last four years and is now in the top quarter of that for similar schools. At key stage 1, results have improved and are in the top half of those for similar schools. In the last two years, the performance of learners entitled to free school meals at both key stages has improved. These learners have achieved better than the average for free-schools-meals learners in the family of schools and the Welsh average.

The systematic approach to ensuring learners' wellbeing is embedded across the school. Learners know that they have a voice and that their contributions are valued. Learner participation is regularly promoted. The wellbeing tracking has shown an improvement in learners' self-esteem and self-confidence, and a sense of responsibility and pride in their achievements.

3 Improving disadvantaged learners' literacy and learning skills

Effective schools have a whole-school approach to developing learners' skills, particularly, the development of literacy and 'thinking' or 'learning' skills. Disadvantaged learners are more likely to face material barriers to progress in literacy, such as having few books in the home, limited opportunities for educational visits and a poor environment in which to study at home. For schools to overcome these barriers effectively, they need to identify specific strategies to improve learners' work across the curriculum. For example, the most effective schools have developed:

- data-sharing, so that all staff have access to up-to-date and relevant information about the skills of the learners in their classes;
- audits to find out where particular skills are taught across the curriculum, enabling the school to highlight where there are deficiencies, repetition or duplication;
- a common approach to teaching specific skills, such as reading, writing or an aspect of number work such as multiplication;
- coherent planning across the school to facilitate progression in skill development;
- staff training on how to deliver these skills, for example on approaches to reading;
- examples of differentiated activities for teachers to use;
- intervention programmes at various levels that are flexible enough to meet the specific needs of learners when required;
- productive partnerships with parents and carers and family literacy programmes; and
- well-organised links at transition points to develop common approaches across phases and key stages.

Effective primary schools in deprived communities recognise that disadvantaged learners often start school with more limited speech and language skills than their peers and make concerted efforts to address this issue. They liaise successfully with social services and specialist agencies to support learners and their families to overcome barriers to learning.

These successful approaches to improving disadvantaged learners' literacy and learning skills are illustrated in case studies 3 and 4.

case study 3

Ysgol Melyd in Denbighshire has developed specialist language support for its learners.

Context of the school

Ysgol Melyd is situated in the village of Meliden near Prestatyn on the North Wales coast. It provides education for learners between three and 11 years of age. The catchment area is disadvantaged and there are high levels of unemployment. All learners come from English-speaking homes.

There are currently 147 learners on roll, including 15 who attend the nursery in the mornings. Approximately 36% of learners are entitled to free school meals. Baseline data shows that attainment on entry to the school is below national and local averages. Forty-three per cent of learners have special educational needs.

Strategy

The school identified increasing numbers of learners with speech and language needs on entry. Since 2004, a language-resource provision has been sited at the school. This caters for the needs of children in key stage 1 with specific, severe speech or language disorders. The children join the rest of the cohort for various school activities.

Increasingly, parents were requesting that their children receive mainstream education at key stage 2 at the school. More learners with speech and language needs joined mainstream classes and their overall numbers increased. As a result, the need for specialist training in teaching and supporting children with speech, language and communication needs became a school development priority. The school's senior leaders decided to purchase a package of specialist training for all staff to provide the skills and knowledge required to teach and support learners with speech and language needs.

Actions

A children's communication charity has established a development programme to meet the needs of those who work with learners who have speech and language needs. In September 2009, the school purchased a package of information, consultancy and training for school staff which would lead to a level 2 enhanced level accreditation. The project was led by the specialist teacher from the language resource provision and the school's special educational needs co-ordinator. Over the following year all staff received training from a consultant. The training was supplemented by in-house training courses. Some staff successfully gained BTEC level 3 Advanced Diploma in paediatric speech and language therapy support.

In addition, the school supports disadvantaged learners with social and emotional difficulties through nurture group activities. A breakfast club was set up to develop positive links between home and school.

There are pictorial timetables in all classrooms, and staff use mind maps and other visual strategies to develop a wide range of learners' communication skills. Teaching assistants implement individual and group activities that are tailored to learners' needs and address the targets on individual communication plans.

The culture of supporting communication has been developed across the curriculum. Meeting the needs of learners with speech and language needs is a core element of the ethos of the school.

Evaluation

An accreditation team visited in October 2010 and awarded the school Enhanced Level Status. Since the accreditation, modifications and adjustments have been made as necessary to enable learners with language needs to access the curriculum and reach their full potential. Learners' progress is tracked using the school's monitoring system.

Outcomes

Staff are more aware of individual learners' speech and language needs. This has resulted in a greater understanding of issues arising from word processing, auditory memory, receptive, and expressive language difficulties. Behaviour has improved and is well managed. Questioning and instruction techniques have been modified and information is delivered in ways that take account of a child's language needs.

By the time learners reach key stage 2, they achieve well. Some learners integrated into mainstream from the resourced provision have reached National Curriculum (NC) level 4 in the core subjects at key stage 2. In 2011, all learners achieved NC level 4 in oracy, 25% of whom achieved NC level 5. In four out of the last five years, performance at NC level 4 plus in all core subjects has been in the top quarter of that for similar schools. No learners have received fixed-term exclusions in the last year.

The resourced provision now attracts more learners. The number of learners who are integrated into the mainstream provision of the school has also increased.

case study 4

Sandfields Comprehensive School has designed a successful whole-school approach to literacy development.

Context of the school

Sandfields School serves the Sandfields estate in Port Talbot, one of the most economically deprived areas in Wales. There are currently 625 learners on roll.

Thirty-nine per cent of learners are entitled to free school meals. Around 12% of learners have statements of special educational needs and 42% have a special educational need. The school houses an enhanced resource provision for 67 learners with moderate, severe and profound learning difficulties.

Strategy

On entry to the school, many of the learners do not have the reading skills to access the curriculum effectively. The school has developed effective strategies to improve learners' skills, particularly in literacy.

Actions

The school has developed a whole-school strategy for teaching skills.

Following staff training, staff scrutinise the programmes of study at key stage 3 to identify where skills are taught across subject areas. Staff then map the frequency and use of specific skills for each curriculum area in each half term throughout key stage 3. This allows the school to respond to any deficiencies in provision.

Senior leaders also analyse literacy and numeracy performance data. Using this information, staff design a structured support programme for those requiring additional help in these specific skills. The resulting language or mathematics workshops are run by the special educational needs co-ordinator in consultation with the heads of English and mathematics. Staff track learners' progress using literacy and numeracy tests. The aim of the language workshops is to improve the functional reading age of learners to above 10 years. This baseline target allows learners' access to the curriculum in key stage 4.

The school provides an individualised programme of withdrawal for both these workshops in key stage 3. Teachers refer learners to the workshops, but learners can also self-refer, and parents can request that their children attend. The school has also suspended French in Year 7 for selected classes experiencing significant language deficiencies. For a term, the French teacher works with the special educational needs team to develop reading skills. Learners follow a structured programme of intervention. This approach develops staff expertise while giving learners more time to develop their literacy skills.

In addition, the English department, having analysed learner data, has introduced a reading programme at key stage 3. All learners follow the programme and it enhances the curriculum by focusing on skills in a structured and measurable way. It provides a uniform approach and ensures that all learners receive a consistent standard of delivery, using appropriate resources, throughout the key stage. The English department has taken a lead to rewrite the whole-school assessment policy. This has helped to improve the consistency of marking and feedback to learners across the school.

Teachers share good practice by uploading resources to the school intranet. For each language resource, there is an indication of readability. This allows staff opportunities to assess their resources and the suitability of the material they use.

At the end of key stage 3, all learners sit Essential Skills Wales qualifications in communication, application of number, and information and communication technology. The aim is for all to gain level 1 and those capable to attain level 2. This process provides a connection to the key stage 4 qualification framework, where all learners follow the Welsh Baccalaureate course.

Evaluation

Senior leaders review curriculum areas regularly to monitor the consistency and quality of provision for skills. The school gathers the views of learners frequently.

Outcomes

Learners make outstanding progress between the point of entry in key stage 3 to key stage 4. By the end of key stage 4, nearly all learners have reached the expected level of competency in reading. When the current Year 9 started at the school, around 73% had a reading age of below 10 years. The learners have made significant gains and currently only 14% of the cohort have a reading age of below 10 years.

In key stage 4, for the last three years, performance has been in the first or second quarter of that for all schools on the free-school-meal benchmarks for all the main indicators. Performance is among the best in the school's family.

The school is successfully narrowing the gap in attainment between learners who receive school meals and those who do not. Over the last five years, at key stage 4, the difference in performance in the core subject indicator[8] between those learners who are entitled to free school meals and their more advantaged peers has decreased from 33% to 17%.

8 The core subject indicator relates to expected performance in English or Welsh, mathematics and science, the core subjects of the National Curriculum.

4 Improving the social and emotional skills of disadvantaged learners

In our 2011 report, we found that leaders in the few schools that improve the achievement of disadvantaged learners have a good understanding of the relationship between wellbeing and standards. They understand that disadvantaged learners are more likely to feel anxious about school, and that they need to feel safe and confident before they can start to learn.

Many effective schools have restructured their pastoral care system to deal with the specific needs of disadvantaged learners. These improved structures often include combining academic, social and emotional support so that disadvantaged learners, whose needs are often complex, can benefit from an integrated approach. Disadvantaged learners benefit from mentoring approaches where they plan their progress, talk about their strengths and weaknesses, and receive specialist support when necessary.

Effective schools see developing learners' social and emotional wellbeing as an important part of their whole-school approach to raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners. They implement a wide range of approaches that support learners in many aspects of school life and work. They review this work regularly to make sure that learners continue to have the support that they need. These approaches include:

- a rich personal and social education programme;
- counselling that includes employing specialist agencies, setting up support groups and peer counselling;
- advocacy processes;
- restorative justice processes[9];
- 'buddy' systems that pair up learners to support one another;
- specific social communication sessions to develop learners' social skills;
- anger management sessions;
- the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning programme;
- multi-agency approaches to dealing with specific issues, such as substance misuse or sexual health; and
- a relentless focus on improving learners' attendance.

Most of the effective schools have a strong personal and social education programme that permeates all aspects of school life and reflects the inclusive ethos of the school. In these schools, personal and social education makes a particularly positive impact on learners' emotional development and on improving standards in speaking and listening.

These successful schools also provide well for learners' moral development and place a significant emphasis on citizenship and responsibility. Volunteering, community activity and charity work are all strong features of these schools. Many of these schools describe themselves as a 'community' or a 'family' where mutual support is praised and encouraged.

Case study 5 below illustrates how one school reorganised its pastoral system to improve the social and emotional skills of disadvantaged learners.

9 Restorative Justice is an approach to behaviour management that focuses on building relationships; taking responsibility and developing emotional intelligence (see Thorsborne, M and Vinegrad, D, Restorative Practices in Schools, 2008).

case study 5

Ysgol Bryn Elian in Conwy has reorganised its pastoral system to cater for the needs of its disadvantaged learners.

Context of the school

Ysgol Bryn Elian is an 11-18 mixed comprehensive school of 850 learners. The school serves the eastern side of Colwyn Bay and the surrounding villages. The catchment area is diverse and includes an area of social deprivation, which is eligible for European convergence funding. Twenty two per cent of learners are entitled to free school meals. Thirty per cent of learners are on the register of special educational needs.

Strategy

The school recognised that the pastoral system needed re-shaping to suit the learners. Disadvantaged learners required particular academic and pastoral support to overcome their individual barriers to progress. A non-teaching learning mentor was appointed to each year group to assist a learning manager, a member of the school's teaching staff. In line with the school's strategic plan, all mentors were trained as learning coaches.

Actions

Learning mentors undertake a range of tasks. They:

- → use Pupil Attitude to Self and School (PASS) test data to identify the barriers to learning for individual disadvantaged learners. Through individual and group work, mentors work with the learner to help address any issues;
- → analyse data for their year group every six weeks, measuring performance and progress against set targets. Where learners fail to reach their targets, strategies are reassessed and learning mentors target individuals for mentoring sessions;
- → provide behaviour support for both staff and learners by carrying out one-to-one sessions with learners, which are then followed up in the classroom, particularly at key stage 4;
- → supervise 'catch-up' sessions and 'coursework surgeries' with learners who have been absent or require additional support;
- → liaise with other agencies to work closely with learners on the child protection register, on the looked-after children register and those who are under the remit of the Education Social Work Service;
- → operate a first-day-absence calling system; and
- → are an integral part of the pastoral structure of the school.

All mentors have also been trained by a clinical psychologist in cognitive behaviour therapy. Individual mentors are trained in an area of expertise. The mentors work as a team by referring groups of learners with specific issues to a mentor who has expertise in that area. Mentors run sessions for learners in areas such as developing friendships, positive thinking and behaviour and group peer support programmes. Mentors also engage learners in projects designed to develop empathy and solve real-life problems.

The school also set up a 'pupil support centre' (PSC) in 2006-2007 to support learners with behaviour issues. The school has recently changed the nature of support offered in the PSC to strengthen learners' emotional wellbeing.

Evaluation

The work of leaning mentors is evaluated through analysis of:

- pupil performance data;
- PASS data;
- monitoring of behaviour and attendance; and
- feedback from learners.

The evaluation of the work of learning mentors has shown that to improve the work that they do, the school needs to:

- identify further accredited training opportunities for mentors;
- strengthen the team by having key workers at key stage 3 and at key stage 5; and
- develop strategies to provide more after school sessions for free-school-meals-learners and for looked-after children.

Outcomes

Attendance levels have been in the top quarter of those for similar schools for the last four years. The attendance of disadvantaged learners has improved.

PASS data shows that learners' attitude to learning has improved.

In the current academic year, there has been a reduction in the number of learners with behavioural problems. All learners supported by the pupil support centre have emotional issues, and have not been referred due to poor behaviour.

At key stage 4, the proportion of learners entitled to free school meals achieving level 2 has increased significantly over the last three years, from 25% in 2009 to 70% in 2011, and performance levels are now much better than family and all-Wales averages.

5 Improving the attendance, punctuality and behaviour of disadvantaged learners

Effective schools have a persistent focus on good attendance, punctuality and positive behaviour. They encourage learners' intrinsic motivation. They have suitable sanctions, but find that reward systems work particularly well, especially to improve attendance.

Another key feature of these effective schools is that they have developed their 'exclusion room' into a positive learning environment or a refuge for vulnerable learners.

These successful approaches to improving attendance and behaviour are illustrated in case studies 6 and 7.

case study 6

Cefn Hengoed Community School in Swansea has succeeded in raising attendance by using a range of approaches.

Context of the school

Cefn Hengoed Community School is an 11-16 mixed comprehensive school on the east side of Swansea. The school lies in the eleventh most deprived ward in Wales and 73% of learners live in 30% of the most deprived parts of Wales. There are 664 learners on roll, 36% of whom are eligible for free school meals. Learner transfers in and out of the school are high.

Strategy

Improving attendance has been a strategic priority that has been explicit in the school development plan since being identified as an inspection recommendation in 2005. At that time, attendance was judged to be unsatisfactory. The inspection team also recommended that the school evaluate and improved curriculum provision in key stage 4 for learners of average and lower ability. The school regarded these recommendations as interrelated.

Key strategic actions to improve attendance have included:

- developing a curriculum relevant to needs at key stage 4;
- transforming the key stage 3 curriculum through changed schemes of work reflecting the skills curriculum;
- motivating Year 9 in the summer term with a programme of accredited key skills; and
- scrutinising the range of attendance issues to identify priorities and establish success criteria to measure improvement.

The school established an attendance focus group with a mission to:

- reduce unauthorised absences;
- define procedures for requests for holidays in term-time;
- reduce truancy and improve punctuality; and
- manage attendance through a business continuity plan.

Actions

Attendance is the first item on the agenda on the governing body, leadership team, senior pastoral team and pastoral team meetings. To improve attendance the school developed a number of approaches:

- a team of pastoral support officers (PSOs), initially established through RAISE funding, was extended and subsequently funded by the school budget. PSOs and the Educational Welfare Officer (EWO) hold frequent meetings. Form tutors support the work of the PSOs on attendance. The PSOs and senior pastoral team hold support meetings aimed at targeted parents;
- the pastoral team was restructured and changes made to teaching and learning responsibilities and in the use of associate staff;
- the school trialled an attendance monitoring text messaging system and, following positive feedback from parents, this was developed for the whole school;
- ENGAGE funding (a European funding scheme, run through the Welsh Government) was targeted at the attendance of learners at risk of becoming not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET) in key stage 4;
- an attendance focus group met monthly, chaired by the headteacher;
- the school invested in staff training to improve consistent linking of attendance and progress in feedback to learners during the twice yearly academic reviews, to parents in parents' evenings and when completing learner reports;

- the school drew on the good practice of its partner primary schools in terms of learner welfare and support. It developed wrap around provision, including a breakfast club and after-school clubs, designed to develop learners' personal and learning skills; and
- a range of multi-agency working focused on attendance, including the 'So To Do' project, Youth Initiative Project, educational psychology service, behaviour support, Engaging Learners in Swansea and Ethnic Minority Language Advisory Service.

Learners are also rewarded for good attendance through:

- major awards in Annual Awards Evening;
- termly letters to parents for learners with 95%+ attendance; and
- special awards for whole year 100% attendance.

Evaluation

Regular meetings ensure that staff monitor and evaluate attendance strategies. These include:

- weekly monitoring meetings of heads of lower, middle, upper schools;
- PSOs meeting prior to PSO/EWO meeting;
- weekly monitoring meetings of PSOs/EWO; and
- monthly monitoring meetings of the attendance focus group to identify issues from examining data by year group, gender and groups of learners (minority ethnic, special educational needs, looked-after children and learners eligible for free school meals).

Outcomes

Outcomes include:

- improved attendance in every year group year on year: over the last five years, overall attendance levels have increased from 83.4% to 90.9%;
- improved attendance across groups of learners. In the last five years, Year 11 attendance levels have increased from 62% to 90.6%;
- reduction in the percentage of unauthorised absence by year group and overall. Overall, the percentage of unauthorised absences has fallen from 15.8% to 0.8% over the last five years;
- increased progression to post-16 as a result of improved attendance and engagement;
- reduction in the percentage of learners at risk of not being not in education, employment or training and in the percentage leaving without qualifications. There has been a steady reduction in the percentage of learners leaving with no qualification, from 7% in 2005 to 0% in 2011;
- closer relationships with parents/carers and individual learners through sensitive attendance monitoring; and
- improved learner wellbeing due to consistent and continuous engagement through improved attendance.

In key stages 3 and 4, the school's performance has improved appreciably over the last three years. Over the last five years, the percentage of learners achieving the core subject indicator at key stage 3 has improved from 45% to 63%, and at key stage 4 from 23% to 37%. Over the last two years, results at Cefn Hengoed have been well above the average for its family of schools.

case study 7

Cwrt Sart Community Comprehensive School has a successful Student Study Centre to support the needs of disadvantaged learners.

Context of the school

See case study 1 (Page 5) for background information.

Strategy

The development of the study support centre started in the summer term of 2008. The aim of the centre was to:

- further support learners' individual needs;
- to promote learner wellbeing; and
- help all learners to achieve their potential through the creation of a safe learning environment.

The centre demonstrates nurturing principles and practices, which are reflected in all aspects of school life. While the main focus of the centre is on social and emotional development, this strategy also promotes academic achievement for each learner.

Actions

In September 2008, a specialist teacher and a learning support assistant were appointed to the centre. The school devised criteria and processes for referral to the centre.

The centre provides:

- an alternative to permanent exclusion;
- support for learners returning from fixed-term exclusion;
- support for persistent truants and those with 'school phobia';
- support for learners referred from staff because of lack of progress due to persistently poor behaviour;
- reintegration programmes for learners formerly attending learner referral units;
- support programmes for learners with long term sickness or pregnancy;
- support for those learners who have been involved in a managed move from another school;
- a setting for learners awaiting placements in alternative provision;
- a refuge for learners who experienced bullying, stress, peer clashes, bereavement and other influences affecting their attendance and progress (these referrals may have come through other agencies and parents);
- appropriate intervention programmes for those learners with additional learning needs; and
- an intervention programme for those learners who have accessed a nurture group in a primary setting and need further support during transition.

Referrals are made in writing to the additional learning needs co-ordinator or the assistant headteacher using the Centre Referral form. An appropriate and structured individualised programme is then set up for the learner. Each learner will have their own timetabled sessions with regular target setting and reviewing. Where relevant, groups of learners work on issues together, for example in behaviour modification. Links with mainstream classes, parents and other agencies are vital and continue to be an integral part of each learner's programme. In this way, learners in the Centre are not isolated from the whole school community.

The school has introduced a parent support group to improve links with learners' families.

Evaluation

Learners' individual progress is monitored through the school's tracking systems. In addition, Centre staff have weekly meetings to review learners' progress. The school involves the Centre staff in peer observation across the whole school to develop effective practice in working with learners with particular needs. The school analyses feedback from parents, staff, learners, local authority advisers and external agencies.

The school plans to develop this provision to include the extension a paired reading scheme involving the peer mentors and targeted students at the Centre, a peer bereavement group and an anger management group for girls.

Outcomes

The work of the Centre has had a positive impact leading to:

- → improved learner attendance;
- → a reduction in referrals due to poor behaviour;
- → a reduction in referrals to learning support; and
- → a reduction in learners requiring multi-agency support;

Eighty-three per cent of learners accessing the centre claimed that they felt more self-confident. Eighty-six per cent of students felt that the support they had received helped them to achieve in the everyday life of the school. Eighty per cent of students felt that their behaviour had been modified and were able to demonstrate this in mainstream lessons. Ninety per cent of learners who have received support during transition stated that they felt less anxious about the changes in school life. All learners who returned to school in Year 11, following an extensive absence of any formal education, have achieved qualifications and moved on to employment or training.

The school has used the evaluation of the Centre to inform other areas of the school's work on developing learners' social and learning skills. As a result of this evaluation, the pre-school breakfast club and break and lunchtime provision now focus on friendship groups, peer mentoring, homework needs and behaviour modification.

6 Tailoring the curriculum to meet the needs of disadvantaged learners

In our 2011 report, we found that most schools had adapted the curriculum they offer to make it more relevant to all learners. However, schools that are most effective at tackling issues of poverty and disadvantage share a number of common approaches to making their curriculum most appropriate to their disadvantaged learners. They:

- analyse data and other information to make sure that learners are placed in suitable groups for their particular needs, and to ensure that they make good progress;
- review the curriculum regularly to tailor it to the needs of learners;
- listen to the views of disadvantaged learners in adapting lessons and schemes of work;
- give a genuine choice to learners, by making sure that options menus are workable;
- offer excellent opportunities for learners to engage with their local community;
- provide experiences and opportunities that enrich the learning experiences of disadvantaged learners and enable them to gain qualifications from out of school hours activities; and
- have mentoring systems that guide learners through their programmes of study and help them to plan their own learning pathways.

Schools that challenge effectively the issues of disadvantage understand that white working class boys are less likely to achieve their potential than any other group of learners. These schools make changes to the way they organise learning experiences to motivate boys, sustain their interest in learning, and help them to improve their skills. They gather information regularly from male learners to adapt the curriculum to better meet their needs and interests. Staff in these schools use research findings to inform their teaching approaches, and do not over-simplify boy/girl issues or generalise inappropriately about boys' preferred learning styles.[10]

In a very few successful schools, the curriculum is also used to explore issues of poverty and disadvantage in a range of subject areas. Teachers in these schools have helped learners consider how positive action can remove or reduce the stigma of poverty and to confront negative attitudes. This can in turn help to raise the aspirations of pupils for their community and themselves.

See case study 1 – to read about how Cwrt Sart Community Comprehensive School in Neath Port Talbot uses its system of profiling to guide pupils through the curriculum.

See case study 11 – to read about how Cefn Hengoed Comprehensive School in Swansea effectively uses strategies for listening to learners to engage pupils in their learning choices.

10 Estyn, Best practice in the reading and writing of pupils aged 7 to 14 years - May 2008

7 Providing enriching and extra-curricular experiences

Disadvantaged learners are less likely than their peers to benefit from a wide range of cultural, sporting and other learning experiences. These learners rarely travel beyond the area in which they live and often do not explore the range of opportunities for learning within their local community. A common feature of most of the successful schools is their extensive provision to broaden the experiences of their disadvantaged learners. This offers learners opportunities to develop their social and learning skills.

Successful schools offer a varied menu of clubs and extra-curricular activities. They plan a wide range of cultural and educational trips, and support disadvantaged learners to take part in residential trips. They evaluate carefully the impact that out-of-hours and enrichment activities have on their disadvantaged learners and involve those learners who would benefit most.

Schools have a variety of creative and sensitive ways to ensure that no learner misses an opportunity because their parents are unable to pay. They provide transport and equipment to ensure equality for all learners. They are pro-active in fundraising and obtaining grant monies.

A few schools offer activities outside the school day that allows learners to gain qualifications such as those in drama or dance, or sometimes using credits from the Children's University. These activities motivate learners and give them opportunities to improve their achievements. Effective schools also flex the school day to make sure that all learners can access these enrichment activities.

Effective schools organise trips to places and events to which disadvantaged learners might not otherwise go, such as museums, and orchestral and theatrical performances. They are aware that even seemingly unexciting activities can make a difference in giving learners confidence and improving their life skills. Even activities such as visiting a nearby city or going on a train can have a positive impact on learners.

However, effective schools in challenging circumstances also make best use of the resources in their own locality. They work hard to be an integral part of their local community. They take learners out into the community and also invite local residents, business people and religious leaders into school.

A few effective schools in areas of high deprivation have become a focal point for regeneration in the area. They have used the school buildings to provide a meeting space for community groups and regeneration activities. For example, Cefn Hengoed Community School has hosted Communities First project group meetings to improve the local environment and to tackle anti-social behaviour. This has helped both the school and the local community to promote community awareness and work collaboratively. It has also enriched learners' experiences and contributed to their Welsh Baccalaureate studies.

A few primary schools in our survey enrol all their learners at the local library. Many of their disadvantaged learners had never been to the library, even though it was within walking distance of the school. These schools forge effective working relationships with staff in the library. This helps them to link work in the library directly to their curriculum and organise project work for more able and talented learners.

Many of these successful schools invite a variety of visitors to school, including artists, poets and authors, to enhance learners' learning experiences. These experiences raise learners' self-esteem by developing their ability to express their ideas and feelings. This has had a positive impact on learners' academic outcomes. Schools select visitors carefully, for example by choosing artists from the local area or by inviting writers who have themselves faced poverty and disadvantage. A few schools have invited male writers into school to act as positive role models for boys.

Many effective schools provide extra resources and time to support learners' academic progress. Outside of school hours, they provide space and information and communication technology equipment, books and staff for learners to further their studies and revise for examinations. This is vital for learners who do not have access to learning resources or a space of their own at home.

case study 8

Ysgol Y Castell Primary School in Carmarthenshire organises trips to Germany and France to enrich the learning experiences of its disadvantaged learners.

Context of the school

Ysgol y Castell is an English-medium community primary school with an integrated nursery. There are about 240 learners at the school, aged three to 11, with a growing school roll. The school is situated in Kidwelly in West Wales, in an area of high deprivation. Thirty-eight per cent of learners are currently entitled to free school meals.

Strategy

The school's strategy was to:

- introduce French in Year 6 and also introduce very basic German in Year 5 in order to correspond with penfriends in link schools in Europe;
- raise aspirations, increase participation and broaden the experiences of disadvantaged learners, by offering all learners one opportunity to travel overseas during key stage 2; and
- develop global citizenship by linking with schools in Germany and France.

The school also planned to improve the attendance rates of its disadvantaged learners and to involve parents in their strategy.

Actions

French has been taught in Year 6 since 2005 when the school was part of a CILT (National Centre for Languages) Cymru pilot for introducing modern foreign languages into the primary curriculum. Throughout the four year pilot, the school worked closely with the modern foreign languages department at Glan y Mor comprehensive, and its cluster of primary schools. At the end of the funded pilot, Ysgol y Castell continued the programme as it had been so successful in inspiring all learners. The focus is on listening, speaking simple sentences, singing simple songs and playing games. The aim of the project is to communicate with penfriends in link schools.

Through links with the Kidwelly Town Twinning Association, the school planned a trip to Brittany. The first visit to the twin town of St Jacut de la Mer in Brittany took place in 2006. The headteacher and the special educational needs co-ordinator took a group of learners from Years 5 and 6. During a third visit, some parents came along. These visits had been largely taken up by parents who either could afford to participate or who felt motivated for their children. As a result, the school applied for a Comenius multilateral grant to get funding for more disadvantaged learners to participate. The school decided to prioritise the participation of learners whose social skills needed development and who had never had the opportunity to travel. Of the 23 learners who participated in the 2011 overseas visits, only four had previously flown, and none had travelled without their parents. The majority had never stayed away from home. Learners were also identified from the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme for tracking wellbeing. As a result, the visit included learners with a range of problems, such as poor self-esteem and a tendency for aggressive play, and those who were easily distracted.

Evaluation

The school gave questionnaires to learners and parents. A group of learners who were targeted to develop their social, emotional and behavioural skills were monitored to assess their development through their individual education plans.

Learners' achievements in modern foreign languages are tracked into the secondary school.

Outcomes

The most notable outcome has been the raised self-esteem of learners. Underachieving boys and those with emotional and behaviour difficulties have gained greatly by encouragement to have a go at something completely new and by communicating with penfriends. Wellbeing assessment tracking indicates that, following the visits, learners have felt more motivated to succeed and take part in more extra curriculum activities.

The secondary school notes a more positive attitude towards learning modern foreign languages and has had a greater uptake of modern foreign languages at GCSE level.

The learners identified as having social and emotional difficulties have improved their skills and attendance. A few have gained confidence to join out-of-hours provision.

The involvement of parents in school activities, meetings and events has also increased.

Learners who are eligible for free school meals achieve very well in Ysgol Y Castell. The gap between the achievement of learners eligible for free school meals and those who are not is smaller than the Wales average at key stage 2. In two out of the last three years, all learners eligible for free school meals have achieved the core subject indicator.

Attendance rates are very good and have been in the top quarter of those for similar schools over the last four years.

case study 9

St. Woolos Primary School in Newport has an 'Aspiration Project' for disadvantaged learners to find out more about the world of work.

Context of the school

St. Woolos Primary School is situated close to Newport city centre in a Communities First area. It serves a very diverse population, both socially and culturally. Fifty-two per cent of learners currently have English as an additional language (EAL) and around 59% come from an ethnic minority background, mainly Asian, covering 35 different home languages.

Within the vicinity of the school there are a local authority homeless hostel and two women's refuges. A significant percentage of the school's population is mobile and joins at a later stage than the Foundation Phase, due to the refugee and transient nature of some families. Around 34% of the learners on roll are entitled to free school meals.

Strategy

The school motto is "Celebrating achievement for all in a caring environment". However, school leaders recognise that, because they suffer disadvantage, many of their learners have limited aspirations.

The school initiated the Aspiration Project in September 2007. The aim of the project is to provide learners with employment knowledge beyond the boundaries of their usual life experiences. The project provides an informed introduction to the world of work and to raise learners' aspirations through visits to the school from adults working in a range of fields. Whenever possible, the school uses the experiences of those who have a direct connection to the school. The visits provide an opportunity for learners to develop their knowledge of the workplace and working life in general; to develop their communication skills; and also explore any individual areas of interest.

This is especially relevant for those children whose parents may not be working, or who may have very little knowledge of the career paths available. The school chooses visitors from a wide range of work places.

The Aspiration Project is part of the Year 6 personal and social education curriculum. It is just one aspect of intervention and support across the whole school to support disadvantaged learners.

Actions

Visitors from the local community come in to talk about their job and their career paths. They meet with the Year 6 learners to present their story, which may include discussion about equipment they have brought along. One such speaker was the Project Manager of the new university building in Newport. He spoke to the learners about health and safety, his job and his education. The learners asked him a range of questions, which broadened their knowledge of the world of work.

Following the presentations, learners discuss their ideas and record their responses in their learning diaries.

Another aspect of the project is the 'World of work day'. Newport City Homes provided the Year 6 learners with a day of activity. Learners visited the head office in Newport and had a brief introduction to the company from the Managing Director. They were then split into one of six groups, which took part in a 'speed interview' meeting lasting five minutes each with six different workers. The worker roles varied from 'plumber' to 'accountant' and 'receptionist', and each worker talked about their job and role in the company.

Evaluation

The project is evaluated through:

- assessment of the learners' questioning skills;
- learners' responses in their learning diary, to evaluate the success of each activity and give valuable evidence for the improvement in learners' skills; and
- learners' feedback through questionnaires.

Outcomes

Feedback from learners has revealed changes in the career aspirations of some learners. It also shows that children's understanding of the world of work increases considerably during the course of the year.

The performance of learners in St Woolos Primary School has placed the school in the top quarter of similar schools in all key indicators for the past five years. In 2011, 80% of learners eligible for free school meals achieved the core subject indicator.

8 Listening to learners and encouraging participation

Disadvantaged learners are more likely to become disenchanted with school from an earlier age than other learners. This is because they often perceive the school curriculum to be irrelevant, are less likely to accept the school culture and have a poorer attendance record. These characteristics, together with a lack of aspiration and less chance of achieving their potential, mean that disadvantaged learners often feel excluded from school life.

Successful schools in challenging circumstances find that developing opportunities for learners to have a say in how and what they learn has significantly improved learners' participation, ambition and standards. These schools listen to their learners effectively. In particular, they:

- gather methodically learners' views about teaching and learning;
- give all learners planned and frequent opportunities to have one-to-one 'listening time' with an adult;
- give learners a key role in school development; and
- involve learners directly to improve standards and wellbeing by using learners as mentors, 'buddies' and tutors.

These effective schools use learner questionnaires regularly to elicit learners' views on teaching, homework, assessment, target-setting, the quality of support from staff and a range of school processes. Schools analyse these questionnaires and feed the outcomes back to learners for further discussion. Teachers take learners' views seriously and use them in planning work and setting policies.

These schools also use other methods to collect information on the views of learners in other ways. For example, they use 'suggestion boxes' so learners can feed information back anonymously. They also use 'ideas walls' for learners to add creative solutions to school issues, and learning diaries where learners keep a continuous record of their thoughts about their learning. In all cases of learner feedback, effective schools ensure that learners recognise that their views are acted upon.

Effective schools in deprived areas make sure that all learners have an input into their school experience, giving them opportunities to be heard as individuals and in groups. In the best cases, schools do not rely solely on their school council as a mechanism for learner voice. In these cases, schools create systems to make sure that the views of learners from all groups, including those who are disadvantaged, are heard.

These initiatives to develop learners' involvement and decision-making in school have had a positive impact on learners' standards, behaviour and attendance. In particular, effective schools have found that, by placing a greater emphasis on the 'learner voice', many disadvantaged learners:

- gain self-confidence;
- are more likely to give up their time to participate in out-of-hours learning;
- are more likely to take on responsibilities in school, such as prefect duties, or as chairperson of an action group or committee;
- have greater levels of persistence; and
- are more likely to set themselves challenging goals.

case study 10

Cwrt Sart Community Comprehensive School has introduced a system of peer mentoring to develop learners' leadership skills and to improve achievement.

Context of the school

See case study 1 (Page 5) for background information about the school.

Strategy

The school development plan links learners' wellbeing and a safe school environment with better outcomes for all learners. The peer mentoring scheme was promoted initially by the local authority. The school developed this programme further to develop learners' leadership skills and to improve achievement. In this way the school gave a clear message that social inclusion was a priority. All Year 11 learners were given this opportunity to participate and to contribute to the life of their community school.

Actions

The peer mentoring scheme is delivered by the Study Support Centre teacher (see case study 5) and the school based counsellor.

Staff training was facilitated by the local authority, based on the work of the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation. This knowledge and expertise enabled staff to introduce the peer mentoring scheme into the school.

The process involves:

→ sharing of staff training across the whole school;

→ governor training;

→ letters to parents to outline the scheme;

→ whole school assemblies to promote and recruit mentors;

→ application forms and interviews; and

→ a mentor training programme.

The programme involves the recruiting and training Year 11 learners. Staff supervise mentors regularly, and hold sessions to discuss their progress and concerns, and to reflect on their practice. Mentors are matched to mentees according to the individual personality and skills of the mentor and the needs of the mentee. Staff ensure that informal support for mentors is always available at any time. Mentees are also given the opportunity to evaluate the programme through discussions and progress logs. Parents of mentors and mentees also support the programme. They contribute to a consultation at parents' evenings and via a parent support group.

A working group that includes representatives from other secondary schools meets regularly to share good practice and to look at ways of improving and evaluating the programme.

Evaluation

The scheme is evaluated in the following ways:

- staff meet every week with mentors to review progress;
- mentees track progress against their targets in their progress logs;
- mentors and mentees complete feedback questionnaires; and
- verbal feedback is received from parents, staff and students.

Members of the local authority and national representatives from the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation share good practice and areas for further development through conferences. Mentees and mentors were invited to present their views at one such event, and to discuss and evaluate their experiences of the scheme. The learners spoke to a large audience comprising of learners from other schools, senior school staff, members of the local authority and local dignitaries. All learners who participated in the event were praised for their efforts, the success of the scheme and level of maturity that they had displayed.

The school now plans to establish a drop-in surgery where learners can self-refer to the scheme.

The mentors have been invited to attend the next cluster meeting to discuss their ideas and views with the primary head teachers. The mentees have clear views for the introduction of an improved buddy system for the Year 6 learners.

Outcomes

Analysis of the questionnaires demonstrated:

- improved self-confidence - 100% of mentors stated that their levels of self-confidence had improved at the end of the scheme;
- 88% rated the training programme as excellent or very good;
- 85% of mentors stated that their problem solving skills had improved as a result of being part of the scheme;
- 80% of mentors stated that their communication skills had improved;
- several of the mentors went on to become senior prefects, including head boy and head girl; and
- 75% of mentees felt that they had improved relationships amongst their peers.

Other outcomes include:

- improved attendance for targeted mentees;
- a reduction in numbers of excluded learners compared to the previous academic year;
- improved behaviour and reduction of repeat incidents with mentees (in specific subject areas and at lunch times); and
- feedback from subject staff and parents via journals, informal discussions at parents' evenings, telephone conversations and home visits which all give positive feedback of the scheme.

case study 11

Cefn Hengoed Comprehensive School in Swansea has effectively developed approaches to listening to its learners.

Context of the school

See case study 6 (Page 18) for background information about the school.

Strategy

The school prioritised the development of learner voice throughout 2010-2011.

The aims were to:

- update and validate the contribution learners make to school decision-making;
- give learners real impact in the school in managing change;
- develop learners' skills of decision-making, discussion and planning;
- develop learners' social and emotional skills;
- enable learners to become active citizens and lifelong learners; and
- place learners at the heart of their own learning.

The school has developed a range of strategies to engage learners in decision making processes so that learners have a direct influence on teaching and learning and curriculum development.

Actions

The school routinely canvasses learners' views on all aspects of school life and work. It has formed a number of learner action groups to develop learners' leadership skills and to engage them more fully in their own learning.

The 'Safety Squad' meets regularly to identify and debate current issues. It has helped to design the school's anti-bullying policy and strategies, and has contributed to the design of a new school building.

The E-Safety Team, whose members also include teaching and associate staff, a county adviser and a link governor, meet to develop policy and practices in information and communication technology.

The Green Team is the learner voice of education for sustainable development and global citizenship in the school, and is a large and thriving learner group. The group is active in the local community and participates in many local environmental projects. It liaises with local environmental groups such as the Kilvey Woodland Volunteers, who now hold meetings in the school. The Green Team leads a weekly recycling service for the whole school.

The Green Team meets with the local feeder primary school's Eco Committee to work on joint activities in the community such as 'litter picks'. The primary school achieved the Green Flag in the Autumn Term of 2010 and advised the Green Team on its final steps towards Green Flag status.

The school is developing learner voice groups that engage learners in decision making about how and what they learn. The year group male and female sports captains form the learner voice of physical education. The humanities group meets regularly to inform curriculum design and teaching in that area and the 'Skills Squad' provides the learner voice for literacy and numeracy.

The school has formed networks with other schools across the region to develop the learner voice for school improvement. Learners from different schools meet to discuss and debate local and national issues, to share good practice and to develop leadership skills.

All learners have the opportunity to complete Essential Skills Wales qualifications in Year 9 and the Welsh Baccalaureate in key stage 4. These courses help to reinforce learners' ability to reflect on and improve their own learning.

Evaluation

Learners undertake a learner questionnaire to review their learning experience and their views feed into the quality assurance process to inform subject development planning and whole school planning.

Outcomes

The Green Team regularly reviews the school environment and contributes significantly to recycling and energy conservation. The team produces a termly newsletter. The school achieved Green Flag status in 2011.

The Safety Squad's contribution to the new school building has helped to create an environment where learners feel safe and bullying is discouraged. Learner feedback confirms that the activity of the Safety Squad contributes to a safer school.

Learner feedback shows that many learners feel that the school listens to their views and makes the changes they suggest. This is a significantly higher proportion than in other secondary schools across Wales.

Improvements in standards can be attributed to a number of key factors. However, the involvement of learners in their own learning and their contribution to planning have had a significant impact on school improvement.

In 2011, English, mathematics and science achievement at level 1 was the highest in its family of schools.

In 2011, boys' performance at key stage 4 was particularly strong in all key indicators.

At key stage 3, the school's performance over a three-year period has improved steadily. In 2011, the school's performance in the core subject indicator, which includes English, mathematics and science combined, was well above the performance of similar schools.

In key stage 4, the school's performance has improved appreciably over the last three years. It has been well above the average when compared with that of similar schools for the last two years.

9 Engaging with parents and carers of disadvantaged learners

Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds have parents who are less likely to be involved in their children's education and are more likely to have a negative perception of school and education.

Our report on parental involvement in primary schools[11] showed that establishing closer links between home and school has a significant impact on learners' wellbeing. Even schools who are effective in raising the achievement of their disadvantaged learners find that engaging parents is a huge challenge. However, most effective schools constantly strive to find better ways to forge partnerships with parents.

Successful schools use a range of methods to communicate with parents. They make sure that newsletters, information on the school website, and leaflets about school life and work are produced in a variety of accessible forms. They use text-messaging and social networking websites to contact parents. The schools that are best at engaging parents also monitor the success of the strategies they use, for example by tracking hits on its school website and surveying parents on a regular basis to canvass their views.

However, these successful schools find that the best way to engage with their parents is to communicate and work with them face-to-face. These schools do more than simply have an 'open door' policy. For example, in primary schools, senior leaders and members of staff deliberately plan to meet parents at the beginning and end of the school day.

A few schools employ a member of staff specifically for liaising with parents. This member of staff greets parents at the school gate every morning and encourages parents to discuss any issues with teaching staff. This activity provides the school with valuable information about its strategies to develop partnerships with parents.

In Ysgol Y Graig in Anglesey, the senior inclusion assistant has an office in the school reception area and is able to address parents' concerns as soon as they enter the school and make themselves known. This means that parents who may feel anxious about approaching the school are attended to immediately.

Schools often find that parents are willing to attend school events such as productions or prize-giving, but fewer parents will attend more formal sessions to discuss learning and progress. A few schools have overcome this problem by putting on events that combine entertainment provided by learners with information in giving items about how to support learners' progress.

11 Good practice in parental involvement, Estyn, 2009

case study 12

Cathays High School in Cardiff has created stronger links with parents and the local community so as to ensure that disadvantaged learners are well-supported.

Context of the school

Cathays High School is an 11 to 18 English-medium school located near the centre of Cardiff. There are 896 learners on roll, including 144 in the sixth form.

The school receives learners from a wide geographical area, with approximately 40% of learners coming from out of the catchment area. They represent the full range of ability, but the attainment of a significant proportion of learners is below average on entry. Thirty-eight per cent of learners are entitled to receive free school meals.

The school has the highest proportion of secondary school age asylum seeker children in Cardiff, typically between 7% and 10% of the school population. This group has a particularly high level of mobility. On average, there is a 20 to 30% turnover of the learner population each year.

Over 30 languages are spoken by learners. These include Arabic, Bengali, Czech, Farsi, Punjabi, Somali and Urdu. No learners or students speak Welsh as their first language. Approximately half speak English as their first language. Support in English as an additional language is provided for 257 learners.

Strategy

Part of the school's strategic planning is to create stronger links with parents and the local community, so as to ensure that disadvantaged learners are well supported. The school has focused attention on learners' transition from key stage 2 to key stage 3 and monitors carefully learners' progress and wellbeing.

Actions

The school makes extensive use of many agencies and community groups to help learners to settle and develop and to strengthen communication links with their parents.

Transition Saturday

The school runs many transition activities including 'Transition Saturday', when the school runs a range of activities for learners and their parents. Disadvantaged learners in key stage 2 are offered additional support in literacy and numeracy.

Bring a Parent to School Day

During Year 7 the parents are invited to spend a morning working alongside their children. Last year, 24 parents took part and this year the school is hoping to increase this number.

Family meetings

All learners in Year 7 are invited to school for a 'Family Interview' with a member of the senior leadership team. Issues such as transition, basic skills, and additional opportunities that are available are discussed. The outcomes from the meetings are fed back to heads of department and heads of year, and are often incorporated into agenda items for leadership meetings. Family meetings are also arranged for learners in Years 10 and 11 to discuss learner progress, ambitions and aspirations. The school ensures that translators are present at such events. The translators also help the staff appreciate and understand particular cultural differences that may impact on teaching and learning.

Using expertise within the community

One minority ethnic group of pupils currently has very low attendance rate. In order to address this, the school has recently accessed the help and support of a local individual from the same ethnic group. He is volunteering his support to act as a link between the parents and the school. The school has previously used a similar scheme with another ethnic group and this did improve communication between the parents and the school.

My Education project: engaging parents and developing learner voice (supported by Cardiff Metropolitan University)

The aim of the project is to engage with parents from different ethnic backgrounds, many of whom are reluctant to engage with the school about teaching and learning issues. Learners designed a piece of interactive media to inform parents and family members about their children's education and how better to understand the education system. Over the course of this year both a DVD and website have been produced. The learners were trained in the use of digital media at Cardiff Metropolitan University to design and direct the work. The next phase of the project will involve learners and their parents working together, so that parents can gain the confidence and skills to take a more pro-active role to support their children's education.

Evaluation

The school monitors and analyses parents' participation at events and parents' evenings. This information is monitored by ethnic group and by the learners' year group.

Following analysis of the evaluation, the school is extending its provision to improve transition from key stage 2 to key stage 3 by offering a three-day course during half term for key stage 2 learners and their parents. The sessions will include activities on accessing Cathays library, fitness and sport opportunities, health issues supported by a local doctor and dentist, healthy eating with the aim of assessing needs and engaging and encouraging parents to become involved with the school.

Outcomes

Many parents feel that they have more confidence in talking to and questioning teachers. The school has employed additional bilingual teaching assistants to act as support and points of contact.

The school's focus on learners from particular ethnic groups and their parents has increased attendance at parents' evenings for these parents from 50% to 86%.

The performance of learners who are eligible for free school meals in those indicators that include English and mathematics is higher than the average for the family of schools.

case study 13

Mount Stuart School in Cardiff has developed effective strategies to engage with parents and carers.

Context of the school

Mount Stuart Primary School serves the Butetown area of Cardiff and is close to Cardiff Bay. There are approximately 330 learners on roll, including nursery children. The school is a diverse community with 96% minority ethnic learners. Forty-nine per cent of learners who have EAL are new to English and 40% have early language acquisition levels. Forty three per cent of learners are entitled to free school meals and 39% of learners are identified as having special educational needs.

Strategy

The school promotes its mission statement "Learning and Living Together" through building strong partnerships with its parents and the local community. During the past three years, as part of its drive to improve standards in literacy, the school has made increasing parental engagement a priority.

The school's strategy to build strong partnerships with its families has two main aims:

→ to enable parents to support their children at home ; and

→ to provide parents with varied opportunities to engage pro-actively with the school and their child's learning in school.

One of the headteacher's performance management objectives is "to improve parents' knowledge and understanding of their learner's learning and achievements through clear communication". This is also a school-improvement priority.

Actions

Open-door policy in practice

The headteacher and deputy headteacher maintain a high profile with parents at the start and end of the school day. This enables senior leaders to talk to parents about their views and aspirations for the school. The headteacher uses this information to formulate school improvement priorities, particularly in the areas of literacy and parent engagement. The school regularly communicates with parents through email and newsletters. In this way the school informs parents about the progress made in learning and teaching as well as organisational matters.

Open-mornings to observe learning and teaching

All parents are invited to visit the school each term to observe an aspect of learning and teaching. Parents meet the headteacher for a brief introduction, after which they are free to visit any classroom. This provides parents with first-hand experience of the different learning and teaching strategies implemented by teachers and teaching assistants. It also provides them with a good insight into the progression experienced by learners as they move from one year to the next. Open-mornings have focused on reading, numeracy, science and learning contexts.

Family Learning

The school has a number of strategies to improve parent literacy and literacy awareness, including English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) classes, Family Literacy classes, 'Bookworm Club' and Language and Play. Staff have a willingness to be flexible with their timetables and classrooms in order to accommodate these groups.

The Family Literacy class is offered to parents of Year 2 learners during the spring and summer terms. Parents meet their children once a week for a literacy session that introduces and explains important reading conventions and learning strategies through a shared text. Staff coach parents on how to read and share texts with their children. Each session begins with a focused introduction led by the teacher on how parents can support children's learning at home. This covers such aspects as correct letter-formation, letter sounds and opportunities to read in and outside the home. Parents then support follow-up work aimed at improving their child's written skills. The school engaged an Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service teacher, who also supported learners in Year 2, to introduce and lead this project. However, the success of the project has also depended on the support of all staff through communicating directly with parents, flexible timetabling and creative use of space within the school.

The Bookworm Club is an in-school library for Foundation Phase learners and parents. Not all parents are able to commit to a whole session and so a shorter session at the end of a specific day is arranged for parents to choose a book from the school library to share with their child at home (this is additional to the school's home-reading books). Teaching assistants are released during Bookworm Club to talk about strategies and share stories with children for parents to continue at home.

The school worked closely with its feeder secondary school to secure additional funding for the Family Literacy class and Bookworm Club through the School Effectiveness Grant.

Parents of learners in the nursery are also given an opportunity to visit the nursery to learn with their children through the Language and Play programme.

In 2009 the school used RAISE funding to purchase a new guided group reading scheme. An important and additional benefit of this was that the existing guided group reading resources were used as a home-reading scheme. The school was able to respond directly to parents' requests for children to take books home more regularly.

Inclusive assemblies and celebrations

The school recently re-introduced class assemblies to provide regular opportunities for parents to engage with the school. The school also invites parents to assemblies and events that recognise festivals celebrated within its multi-faith community.

Parent volunteers

A number of parents volunteer to support learning in Foundation Phase classes. They listen to readers and support a range of activities. The deputy headteacher manages this aspect and supports parents' applications for access courses or national vocational qualification training preparing them for work in schools.

Evaluation

The school regularly seeks the views of parents. Feedback is requested from parents at parent evenings and their views are also sought more formally through an annual questionnaire. This feedback is used to inform the school's self-evaluation report and school improvement priorities.

Senior leaders visit family literacy sessions to discuss attitudes to reading and learners' views about the project. This has provided useful feedback and informed the school's decision to continue the project. Parents' attendance is also recorded in order to measure their commitment. Each learner has an individual project book, which provides good evidence of the progress they make, particularly in writing and reading comprehension. This is monitored by the project leader and class teacher as further evidence of the child's progress.

Outcomes

Monitoring of standards in Year 1 and Year 2 books identified improvements in presentation and standards of writing among learners who attended the family literacy project. Of the eight Year 2 learners who attended, five achieved level 2 English and one learner achieved level 3 in writing. All learners in the group made good progress in their reading from January to July. Benchmarked reading assessments indicated that six learners improved by at least 10 book band levels (that is, through 10 incrementally more challenging reading books) and two learners by at least 20 book band levels. Parents were very positive about their involvement in the project.

The local authority's latest school review found that nearly all learners were highly engaged, motivated and keen to learn. They enjoy school, work hard and show pride in their work.

Feedback from parents during the previous parental consultation evening was very positive and included the following comments: "great communication and interaction", "interaction between teachers and parents has increased", "we are kept informed of decisions and news", and "good to see the increased involvement of parents in school activities".

The most recent parent surveys (January 2012) were very positive. All parents believe that their children like school and that the teaching is good. Nearly all parents feel they are kept well informed about their child's progress and are comfortable with approaching the school. Most think that homework builds on what their child learns in school.

Learners make very good progress from key stage 1 to key stage 2. At key stage 2, performance has been above the average for the family of schools for five years. Learners entitled to free school meals achieve very well. At key stage 2, the percentage of learners entitled to free school meals who achieved the core subject indicator has increased significantly over the last four years from 62% in 2008 to 91% in 2011.

10 Developing the expertise of staff to meet the needs of disadvantaged learners

Many headteachers identify lack of staff commitment to raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners as a key barrier to overcome in tackling issues of poverty and disadvantage. These headteachers have found that staff training and development are needed to tackle this issue. Most successful schools invest significantly in developing the skills of leaders, teachers, support staff and governors to improve outcomes for disadvantaged learners. These schools understand well the specific needs of their learners and identify professional development opportunities that meet the particular needs of learners in their schools.

In terms of teaching, a focus on improving differentiation has had the most impact in schools that are effective in tackling poverty and disadvantage. Successful schools use their data-tracking systems to identify the specific needs of their disadvantaged learners and ensure that all staff can access information about individual learners. In many successful schools, teachers regularly re-examine teaching approaches, such as lesson-planning, to meet the needs of their disadvantaged learners.

Many of the successful schools have a strong culture of sharing good practice, both within and outside the school. These schools provide plenty of opportunities for teachers to observe one another and to share approaches to planning across the school. They have spent time on developing whole-school approaches in such areas as approaches to teaching literacy skills, promoting emotional wellbeing and raising boys' achievement. They have also identified training opportunities for staff to develop specialist skills such as those in play therapy or anger management.

Nearly all the successful schools use performance management processes to improve the standards and wellbeing of their disadvantaged learners. In these schools, all staff have specific and measurable improvement targets that are related to the school target of raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners. This makes all staff accountable for raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners and helps these schools to evaluate their progress.

Many effective schools identify individual members of staff to lead specific initiatives to tackle poverty and disadvantage. This approach has benefited these schools by:

- increasing expertise about raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners within the school;
- sharing information on the most effective strategies to deal with the needs of particular individual or groups of learners; and
- improving communication across the school.

Leaders of effective schools also emphasise particularly the importance of well trained and well-deployed support staff. In many successful schools, support staff are often highly qualified and lead school initiatives that benefit disadvantaged learners in key areas, such as specialist communication skills or aspects of emotional and behavioural support.

Nearly all the successful schools have identified a member of the senior leadership team to take responsibility for performance of all disadvantaged learners, irrespective of their needs and abilities. They co-ordinate the school's approaches to tackling poverty and disadvantage by drawing together all the various strategies in a coherent and consistent way. In addition, they carry out rigorous evaluations of whether the strategies are having their desired effect.

A few schools identify raising staff morale as a vital aspect in tackling poverty and disadvantage. Disadvantaged learners, in some cases, present challenging behaviour that requires a robust and positive approach. Even in schools with a broad range of support strategies for disadvantaged learners, teachers often have low expectations of learners. Effective leaders overcome this barrier by sustaining a constant drive to raise expectations and by instilling in teachers a belief that they can make a difference. To do this, they employ approaches such as:

- allowing a teacher to become the expert in a particular area, such as family liaison or data tracking, through staff training;
- setting up 'peer support' groups, where teachers observe one another teach and offer help and support;
- organising team teaching; and
- planning 'away days' where all staff work together on specific issues and share approaches.

Appendix

Evidence base

This report is based on evidence from visits to schools, scrutiny of data and inspection reports.

The sample of 15 schools included English-medium schools and Welsh-medium schools, and schools in rural and urban areas. The sample included five secondary schools and 10 primary schools. All schools in the survey have at least 20% of their learners eligible for free school meals and are situated in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage. The schools were chosen for the survey through an analysis of school performance data and scrutiny of inspection evidence.

The schools

The following schools took part in the survey:

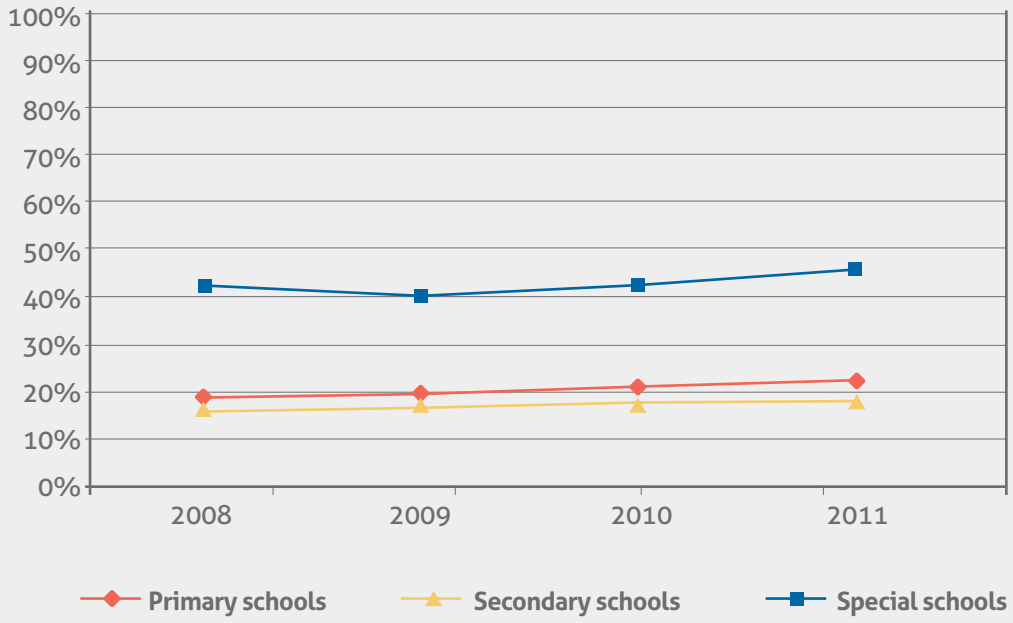
- Bryn Elian School, Conwy;
- Cathays High School, Cardiff;
- Cefn Hengoed Comprehensive School, Swansea;
- Cwrt Sart Community Comprehensive School, Neath Port Talbot;
- Llwynypia Primary School, Rhondda Cynon Taf;
- Milton Primary School, Newport;
- Mount Stuart Primary School, Cardiff;
- Nant Y Parc Primary School, Caerphilly;
- Sandfields Comprehensive School, Neath Port Talbot;
- St Woolos Primary School, Newport,
- Williamstown Primary School, Rhondda Cynon Taf;
- Ysgol Gynradd Tirdeunaw, Swansea;
- Ysgol Melyd, Denbighshire;
- Ysgol Y Castell, Carmarthenshire; and
- Ysgol y Graig, Isle of Anglesey.

Data

In 2011, the Welsh Government published statistics[12] that indicate that the percentage of learners eligible for free school meals has increased over the last three years. The proportion of learners eligible for free school meals provides a useful indication of socio-economic circumstances[13].

The link between disadvantage and educational underachievement is still strong. In general, learners from poorer families do not achieve as well as their peers.

Percentage of learners eligible for free school meals



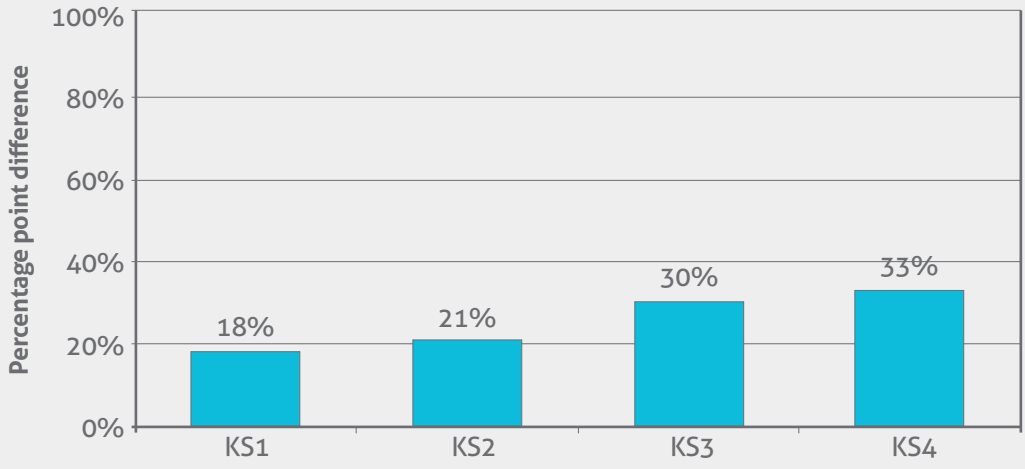
Welsh Government data for 2011 shows that learners eligible for free school meals still perform significantly less well than those not eligible for free school meals against key performance indicators. The gap in percentages attaining the core subject indicator between those learners eligible for free school meals and their more advantaged peers increases with each successive key stage. Since 2009, at key stages 1, 2 and 3, there has been a slight decrease in the gap in percentages between learners who are eligible for free school meals and those who are not. However, at key stage 4, this difference has increased by two percentage points since 2009.

12 StatsWales 2011

13 Learners are eligible for free school meals if their parents or carers are in receipt of certain benefits, and claim an entitlement to free school meals through their local authority. It is, however, an imperfect measure of poverty and disadvantage because not all families claim the benefits or the school meals to which they are entitled.

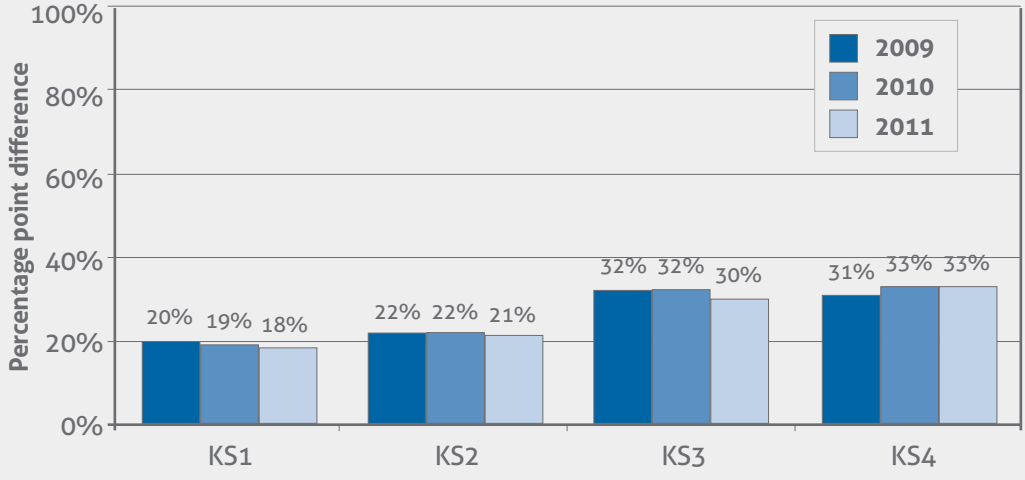
The data below shows the relative percentages attaining the core subject indicator of learners entitled to free school meals and those who are not.

Gap in percentages of FSM and non-FSM pupils attaining the core subject indicator at each key stage in 2011



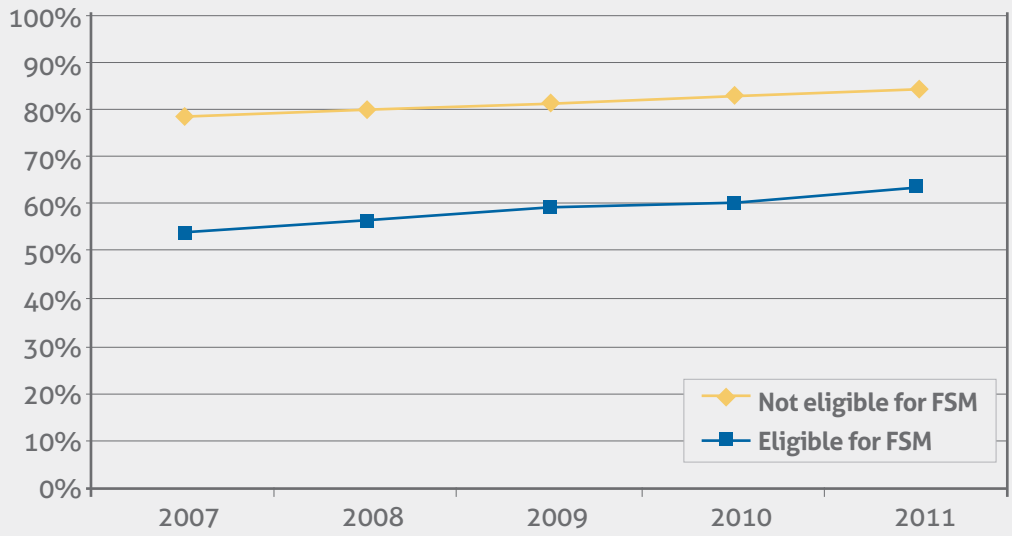
The percentage point gap increases with each successive key stage. The chart below shows that at key stages 1, 2 and 3 the gap in percentages has decreased slightly over the last three years. However, at key stage 4 the percentage point difference of those attaining the core subject indicator between those entitled to free school meals and those who are not has increased from 31% in 2009 to 33% in 2011.

Gap in percentages of FSM and non-FSM pupils attaining the core subject indicator at each key stage between 2009 and 2011



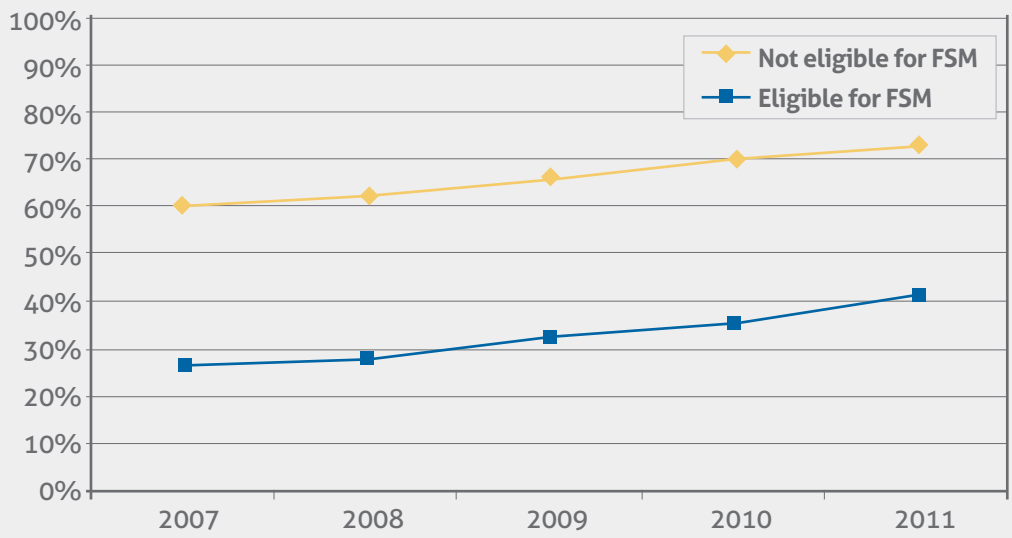
The chart below illustrates how the achievement of all learners at key stage 2 in the core subject indicator in Wales has improved over the last five years. The gap in the percentages attaining the core subject indicator between those entitled to free school meals and those who are not has narrowed slightly, but remains persistently wide.

Percentage of pupils achieving the key stage 2 core subject indicator, by FSM eligibility

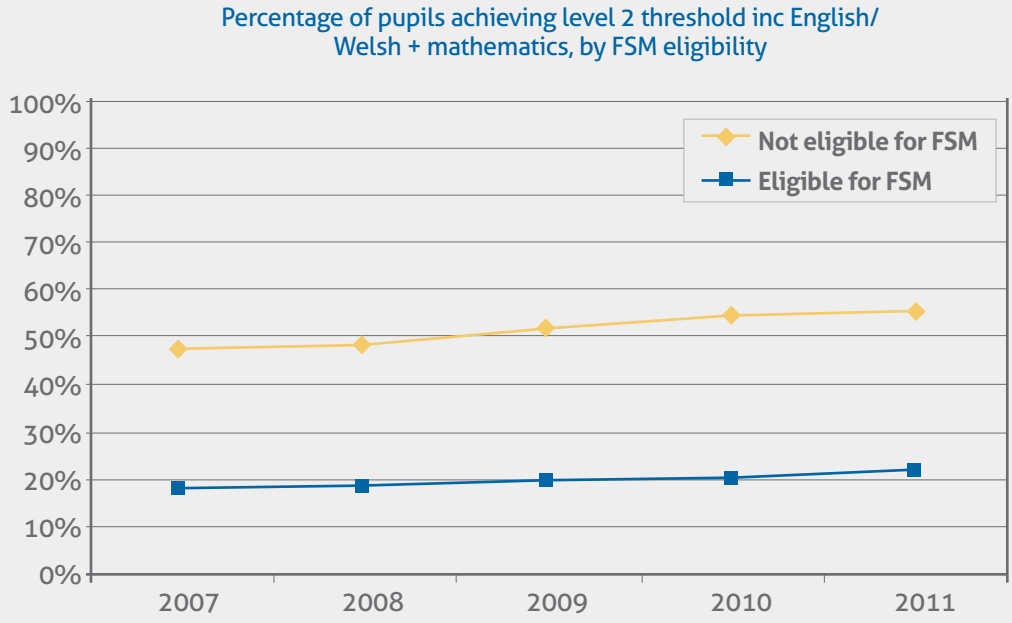


At key stage 4, the performance of all learners in the level 2 threshold has improved at the same rate. The gap in attainment between those entitled to free school meals and those who are not has remained consistent over the five years at 33 percentage points.

Percentage of pupils achieving level 2 threshold, by FSM eligibility



In the level 2 threshold including English and mathematics at key stage 4, the gap in the percentages attaining this threshold between those learners who are entitled to free school meals and those who are not has increased by four percentage points, from 30 percentage points in 2007 to 34 percentage points in 2011.



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