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Closing the Gaps

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Summary of findings across the case study schools

1.1 Introduction

Ipsos MORI was commissioned by the Central South Consortium (CSC) to conduct research with six case study schools in summer 2015. CSC has identified ten 'Hub' schools to work with to promote a region-wide focus on closing the educational attainment gap between pupils who are eligible for Free School Meals (e-FSM) or are looked after (LAC) and other pupils.

The designated Hub Schools will benefit from a range of activities over the next 12-24 months, including an action research programme for senior school leaders, workshops for staff at all levels, a coaching programme for eFSM children that helps to develop meta-cognitive skills, and greater support for schools via Schools Challenge Advisors. The diagram overleaf (Figure 1) depicts how the CSC activity with Hub schools is expected to help to tackle the attainment gap across the consortium.

Ipsos MORI conducted initial visits to six of the ten Hub schools in summer 2015 to understand schools' contexts and the key issues they face, their current strategies for closing the attainment gap, their use of resources such as the Pupil Deprivation Grant for closing the gap, and the perceived impact of the work they have done to date on the attainment gap. The intention is to revisit schools in 12-24 months' time to explore how Hub activities have affected school practice.

The six case study schools were selected by CSC to provide a range of schools by phase, proportion of eFSM pupils, the size of the attainment gap currently, and to include schools open to working with the Hub initiative.

1.1.1 This report

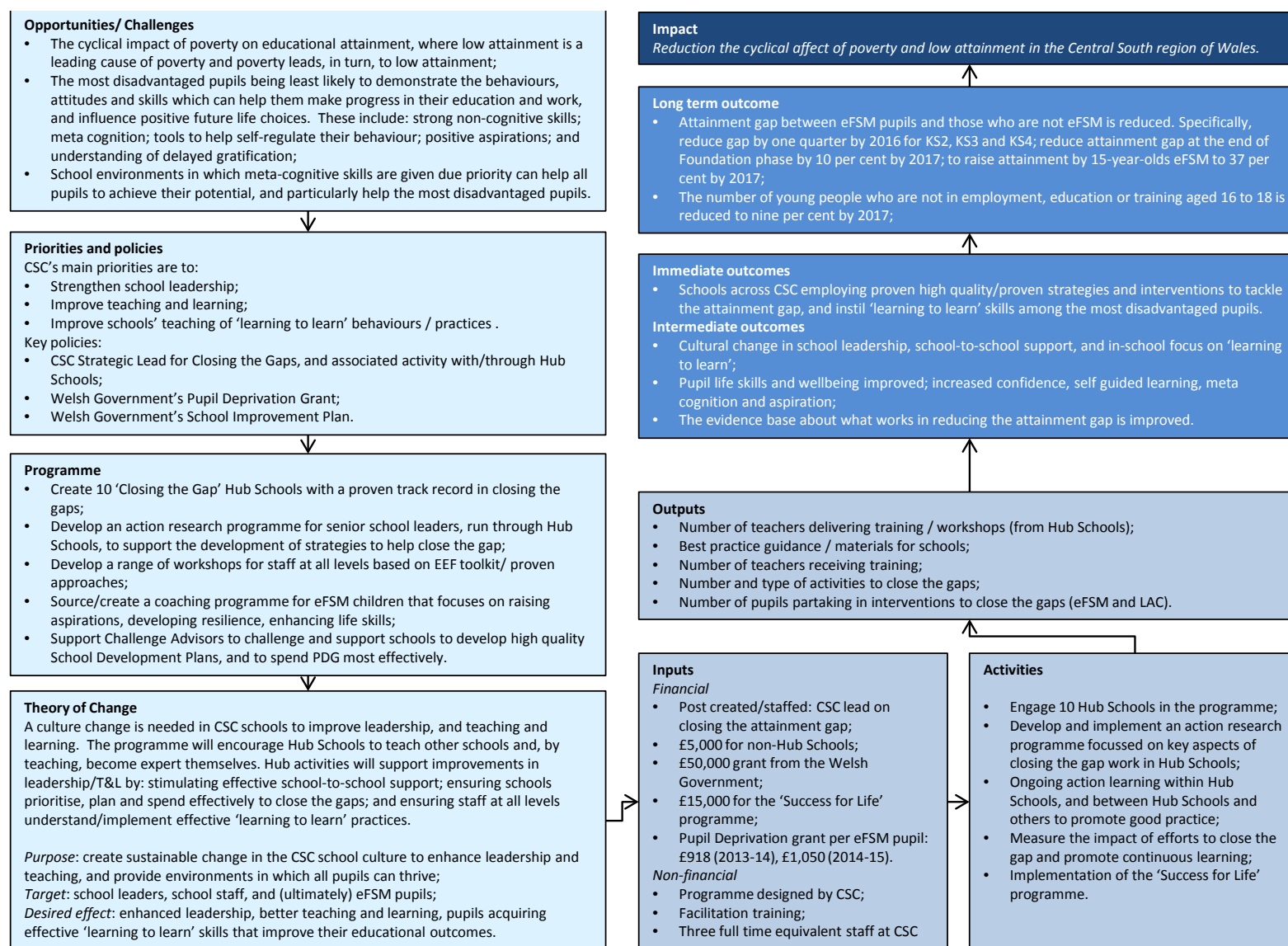
This report is formed of two main sections.

The first section provides an overview of how the six case study schools are implementing the ten key themes described by Estyn as fundamental in tackling the attainment gap. These ten themes are

1. Taking a whole-school, strategic approach to tackling disadvantage
2. Using data to track the progress of disadvantaged learners
3. Focusing on the development of disadvantaged learners' literacy and learning skills
4. Developing the social and emotional skills of disadvantaged learners
5. Improving the attendance, punctuality and behaviour of disadvantaged learners
6. Tailoring the curriculum to the needs of disadvantaged learners
7. Providing enriching experiences
8. Listening to disadvantaged learners and provide opportunities for them to play a full part in the school's life
9. Engaging parents and carers of disadvantaged learners – they communicate and work face-to-face to help them and their children to overcome barriers to learning
10. Developing the expertise of staff to meet the needs of disadvantaged learners

The second section provides individual case study descriptions of the six schools. The descriptions are intended to provide a baseline, before significant work has been done as part of the Hub initiative, against which future activity can be compared for each school.

Figure 1: Theoretical model to describe how Hub School activity will impact on the educational attainment gap in South Central Wales



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

The case study schools each adopted slightly different definitions of disadvantage which reflected the circumstances of their local communities. Schools' working definitions of disadvantage did not always map onto eFSM status neatly. For example, one school with a very high proportion of pupils with English as an Additional Language found that eFSM was less significant a barrier to attainment than language, and prioritised its efforts accordingly. Another school in a very disadvantaged area felt that those on the borders of eFSM status could be as disadvantaged as eFSM and treated disadvantage as a whole-school issue. However, there was little evidence that schools' strategies and focus was based on underachievement rather than measures of disadvantage. Schools with the best track records on tackling the attainment gap had long-term strategies and did not eschew challenges that required long-term solutions, such as engaging parents in school life.

Disadvantage was often conceived of in terms of pupils facing a lack of parental support and/or a lack of aspiration. Schools' visions and mottos often reflected their strategies to overcome these particular challenges. Most schools placed a strong emphasis on engaging parents via a number of channels, although this was not the case in all schools. Case study schools also placed a strong focus on raising pupils' aspirations within their overarching strategies, and on raising the expectations of staff about what pupils were capable of achieving. In several schools, a strong element of competition was introduced across a number of whole-school systems with the intention of raising aspirations, preparing pupils for life outside school, and to help increase motivation.

There was evidence across the case study schools that Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs) had established a vision for the school that was clearly communicated across the school staff. A comment from a teacher in one school – that “everyone knows the direction we’re heading” – is typical of the way staff were aware of their school's broader vision. Staff and SLTs gave a consistent account of the school's mission. School's visions typically focussed on pupil- and parent-oriented approaches, but the schools with the best track records also placed a strong emphasis on staff wellbeing and professional development.

Schools with the best track records ensured that strategies were built into the performance management of staff at all levels. In these schools, staff had clear responsibilities in relation to pupils' attainment and wellbeing, and staff across the school inputted into reviews of pupils' progress. One school stressed the great improvements they had seen in pupil progress since accountability had been broadened beyond individual class teachers to higher levels of the management team. The performance objectives set for individual members of staff reflected the goals set for pupils; in one case, these responsibilities extended to Learning Support Assistants who had responsibilities for tracking the impact of literacy and numeracy interventions they administered, and finding ways to improve their effectiveness.

1.3 Using data to track the progress of disadvantaged learners

1.3.1 In-depth knowledge of pupils

Schools with the best track records in tackling disadvantage placed particular emphasis on knowing their pupils. This extended beyond the use of pupil performance data to having strong personal relationships with pupils, and building a deep knowledge of the pupil's circumstances and learning barriers beyond the school environment. The use of performance data is just one means through which teachers understand the needs and progress of pupils, but staff acknowledged how powerful the use of data has been. Case study schools collected regular data on performance, behaviour and wellbeing and had a real sense of what each pupil was doing. As one headteacher commented:

"Whereas maybe 20 years ago it was perhaps more anecdotal, a little bit more gut instinct...the increasing use of the data enables you to identify the needs of all pupils and reduce the risk of pupils falling through a net really and not being identified"

Headteacher

Various mechanisms ensured that schools understood pupils to the best of their ability as outlined below.

1.3.2 Clear lines of accountability

There were clear lines of accountability as to who was responsible for data collection and analysis. Across the case study schools a member of the senior management team, often the deputy or assistant headteacher, was accountable for the overall management and analysis of data.

However, a number of case study schools highlighted that the analysis of data and decisions based on those data are most effective when they involve a wider group of teachers. One school has found that the ability of teachers to analyse data effectively has improved since they were given responsibilities for analysing the performance of their pupils in advance of formal meetings with the SLT to review progress.

1.3.3 Regular monitoring to inform practice

Each school operated its own schedule for monitoring data, but in all cases data were regularly reviewed, usually by a team comprising members of the SLT, classroom teachers and (in one case) learning assistants to monitor progress and discuss plans to improve performance among pupils who were underachieving against their targets. A few case study schools used data



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Headteacher



management systems that provided automatic alerts during the year when pupils were under performing against targets.

Data management systems typically included a number of flags highlighting deprivation indices (such as e-FSM status, English as an Additional Language, Special Educational Needs) or other characteristics that flagged pupils as requiring particularly close monitoring to ensure they fulfilled their potential (e.g. Gifted and Talented). This ensured teachers were aware of the needs of individual pupils, set targets appropriately, and paid particular attention when reviewing progress data for these pupils.

There was evidence of schools making timely and effective use of monitoring data. For example, one case study school analysed behaviour data and found that behaviour incidents often clustered after lunchtime. They also found that interventions running in the period immediately after lunch were less effective than those at other times. The scheduling of literacy and numeracy interventions has subsequently been shifted and proven more effective as a result. In other cases, data were analysed to tailor the curriculum for pupils during the course of the academic year, with specific interventions introduced for disadvantaged pupils who were failing to progress as anticipated.

1.3.4 Breadth of data collection

A variety of formal and informal data sources were used. Beyond internal and external tests and examinations, schools drew on pupils surveys such as Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS); data on pupil behaviour; and data derived from interventions such as Read Write Inc.

Case study schools drew on external benchmarking data from bodies such as the Fischer Family Trust so they could set appropriate and ambitious targets for their students. Among secondary schools, data from feeder primary schools was used to ensure that appropriate support was put in place from the start of pupils' secondary school career.

1.4 Focusing on the development of disadvantaged learners' literacy and learning skills

1.4.1 Coherent literacy and numeracy approach across the whole school

All schools had interventions which aimed to improve literacy, numeracy and learning skills. Case study schools bought in interventions such as Read, Write Inc, Star Reader, the accelerated reader programme, and BKSb. Students using these programmes like the fact they could track their progress through each level of attainment, and the sense of making progress fairly quickly which gave them confidence:

"It is amazing in the short time that you can get through E2 to E3 and then Level one"

Male student

Case study schools explained that having a single literacy approach across the school helped in providing a coherent progression for pupils. A few case study schools explained the steps they had taken to ensure that literacy and numeracy strategies were embedded across the whole school, including training all teachers on the strategies to ensure that literacy and numeracy were taught across all subjects in the curriculum, including non-specialists.

1.4.2 Small group interventions

For pupils who required more intensive support to reach their objectives, one-to-one or small group work on literacy and/or numeracy was typical, often delivered by a Learning Support Assistant, and often following particular interventions. In some schools underachieving pupils drop other subjects to focus on literacy and numeracy. Pupils valued this time away from normal lessons, with many talking about how their confidence had increased as they did not feel embarrassed to ask questions, as they did in normal classes:

"In normal classes if you are struggling a lot of people who think they are all big will keep on laughing at you, being horrible. In literacy and numeracy with the small class and people on the same level then it is easier to ask for help"

Male student

1.4.3 Restorative approaches

Many schools used restorative approaches in order to develop social and emotional skills as well as enhancing their literacy skills by improving their ability to articulate their feelings and views. One case study school noted that many students did not get a place at universities where there was an interview stage because they struggled to articulate their ideas. The restorative approach, which uses a set series of questions to encourage discussion, was used in several ways, including to help pupils articulate their views about the books they were currently reading. To facilitate the 'circle time' discussions used in some restorative practices, one school sets up the classroom in a circle to encourage this form of teaching.



In normal classes if you are struggling, a lot of people who think they are all big will keep on laughing at you, being horrible. In literacy and numeracy with the small class and people on the same level then it is easier to ask for help.

Male student



1.4.4 Technology

There was evidence of innovative use of technology. In one school, iPads were given to all year 7 pupils. The iPads were used to run Apps such as Maths Watch which were used in lessons. Instant data on pupils' progress is gathered by the App as pupils complete exercises, so that teachers can easily identify any pupils struggling in real time and target support effectively. These Apps could also be used by student and parents at home to revise topics. A mathematics department Facebook page was also used to engage children and parents: teachers posted maths problems for children and young people to answer each day.

1.4.5 Meta cognition

Meta cognition skills were also raised by schools as being key to raising attainment. (Teachers typically referred to it as 'learning to learn.') Case study schools had various activities which aimed to equip students with these skills. Thinking maps and hats were used to encourage children to think about their learning. Others held revisions skills classes, so that children were taught how to revise independently.

1.4.6 Examinations

Another tactic used by schools was to focus on examining their pupils, so that they were used to exams, as many found this to be a daunting experience. So much so, that some did not turn up to exams. Schools hope to conquer pupils' fear of examinations by making them part of the school culture.

1.4.7 Working with parents

Working with parents to improve their numeracy and literacy skills, so they could more easily help their children with their homework, was also used as a way of raising attainment. One school felt that engaging parents was one of the most important elements in raising attainment. Further details of schools working with parents can be found later in this chapter.

1.5 Developing the social and emotional skills of disadvantaged learners

1.5.1 Raising aspirations

Raising aspirations was a key part of most schools' strategy. Many teachers reflected that students often had low aspirations as a result of their families' experiences and influence.

Different approaches were used to raise aspirations. Case study schools have recently started the Successful Lives programme, which promotes aspiration and resilience. Another approach was to consciously set high grade targets for students. Part of the ambition of this strategy was raising the aspirations of class teachers, so they believed students could achieve high grades.

Research was put to good use to inform the development of social and emotional skills. One school focuses on the growth mindset work of Carol Dweck (which has also been used by The Sutton Trust). This promotes the idea that basic skills can be improved, rather than a child being naturally good or not good at something. Even if they did not explicitly reference this research most schools embraced this principle.

1.5.2 Restorative approaches

As noted above, restorative approaches were used across the case study schools to develop social and emotional skills, and the articulation of feelings.

1.5.3 Work experience

Schools also helped students to gain work experience, to broaden their horizons. This included CV training, as well as links with local businesses to set up work experience placements.

1.5.4 Counselling and peer mentoring

Most schools have on site counsellors for children and families. Pupils consulted valued the fact that ‘there’s someone to talk to about things that matter, and you know it won’t go any further’.

Peer mentoring is also a popular way of improving the leadership and confidence skills of pupils. One school found that girls were particularly lacking in confidence. A girls club was therefore set up, where older students teach the younger ones hair and beauty skills.

1.6 Improving the attendance, punctuality and behaviour of disadvantaged learners

Schools used a range of behaviour management systems, with the most sophisticated involving tracking and monitoring incidents, and providing disruptive pupils with their own behaviour plans and targets that were jointly owned by pupils and teachers. Behaviour plans used a mix of punishments and praise to reinforce positive behaviour. As one teacher commented, most children are “not naughty children necessarily” and strategies in this area were often focused on understanding and overcoming barriers to good behaviour.

1.6.1 Understanding the barriers

All schools worked with children and families to find out the root cause of the poor behaviour or attendance. One school used the restorative approach when dealing with attendance issues. This involved students discussing the reasons why their attendance might have been poor. This allowed the young person and school to address the issues underlying poor attendance or punctuality. For instance, the school found that more girls than boys tended

to be late or absence because of families' expectations that girls should stay to look after the home.

Engagement officers were key in understanding the root causes of bad behaviour and were often a key link between families and teachers. For instance, the poverty in some areas means that children sometimes have no electricity in the evenings and are unable to do their homework. As well as an engagement officer, one school also had an attendance officer who analysed data to identify attendance issues.

1.6.2 Tackling the barriers

Case study schools felt that the lack of engagement of pupils partly stemmed from the lack of engagement of their parents and the fact that many did not see the benefits of an education. Therefore family engagement was a key part of working to improve attendance, as well as identify barriers preventing good attendance. In one school engagement officers picked parents up from their home and provided transport to parents' evenings, for instance.

Schools also engaged with communities to increase school buy-in. For instance, some schools found that students were being taken out of school for a couple of weeks to visit the country when their parents originated, Therefore the school worked with the community in order to try to prevent this from happening.

1.6.3 Use of incentives to improve behaviour

A culture of competition was used as a method of encouraging young people to improve attendance. One school established a house system and rewards (such as bacon sandwiches) were given to houses or classes with good attendance. This approach of rewarding whole classes was used in other schools as the feeling was that students would encourage each other to improve, so that they would get the reward.

1.6 Tailoring the curriculum to the needs of disadvantaged learners

Estyn suggests that curriculum tailoring entails regular reviews of the curriculum; ensuring that disadvantaged learners are being listened to when the curriculum is designed; that disadvantaged pupils are given access to enrichment activities; mentoring systems that allow pupils to develop their own learning pathways; and tailored approaches for certain groups of the pupil population.

Schools are actively tailoring some elements of curriculum and wider support to the needs of disadvantaged learners. Schools utilised structures such as class size, teacher deployment and ability matching to aid disadvantaged learners. There was however no discussion of regular reviews of the curriculum specifically based on the needs of disadvantaged children. The extent to which schools are listening to the views of disadvantaged learners and providing enrichment experiences is discussed in later sections.

1.6.1 Mentoring systems

Schools have integrated systems of ‘assertive mentoring’ for pupils. For some schools this is driven by a belief that pupils often do not have effective mentors or authority figures in their lives outside of school. These activities attempt to raise aspirations amongst pupils by instilling a target setting mentality and providing effective guidance on reaching these goals. Pupils are given challenging targets by their mentors and they meet regularly to revisit these with their mentors. Data is rigorously collected to ensure that pupils know where they stand against their targets and for mentors to challenge them with.

Mentoring is carried out by senior members of staff. For instance in one school the assistant head runs the programme which is targeted at eFSM pupils. This assistant head was given specialist training in these techniques. At other schools this role is taken by heads of houses or class leaders.

1.6.2 Structural design

Schools use small group sizes for several of their literacy and numeracy interventions in order to give students increased opportunities to query teachers, greater one-to-one support and to develop their confidence in learning. These interventions are also set up by current level of subject achievement. The fact that children are at the same stage means that the lesson or intervention can be focussed on the level that the pupil is at, and means that all of the children feel that they can succeed. This is reinforced by the ability of pupils to quickly progress through these setted groups in most interventions, as their level of achievement increases.

1.6.3 Availability of after school support

One school provided access to a homework bus; this ensured that pupils can stay in school for study after the end of the day. This was particularly important for disadvantaged pupils in keeping up with the curriculum.

1.6.4 Tailored approaches

There were some examples among schools of specific activities aimed at white working class boys. In particular, the use of physical literacy to encourage pupils to engage with education and specifically to enjoy coming to school through the use of physical education. Some schools principally used rugby teams as a way of encouraging this and had employed specialist coaches with mentoring approaches.



Because there are less people in the class it makes me more confident and the teacher helps you more

Male pupil



Everybody is on your level so you don't feel embarrassed to say that you are struggling.

Female pupil



1.7 Providing enriching experiences

All the case study schools visited acknowledged the link between pupil deprivation and unequal access to enriching life experiences. They also described the lack of these experiences as a barrier to aspirations amongst disadvantaged pupils. All schools thus had a substantial number of interventions providing enrichment activities, with the majority based around extra-curricular activities run through clubs and societies. Some schools had also looked at the 'Experience model' and were slightly more structured to their approaches to providing experiences. The 'Experience' model argues that all children should have experiences such as visiting a beach, or museums. Schools monitor children's 'experiences' while attending the school to ensure they have had all of these during their time there. Schools also focused on activities to promote skills-based activities and had efforts to improve relations with the local community.

As mentioned, providing opportunities for enriching experiences can expand the way that the curriculum impacts upon disadvantaged pupils. Estyn suggest that schools' strategy can impact upon this in a number of ways; by providing access to clubs, extra-curricular activities and trips that develop social and learning skills, by fundraising to ensure that cost is not a barrier, and by forging closer links with the community.

1.7.1 Extra-curricular activities

A diverse range of activities were offered by schools visited in the form of after school clubs, lunch time activities and one-off events. Schools had hired specific staff, often through the funding provided by the Pupil Deprivation Grant, to run these sessions, with the belief that even if adopted for the whole school they would disproportionately benefit disadvantaged children. Case study schools monitored attendance at these sessions was to ensure that children from disadvantaged backgrounds were benefitting. Opportunities outside of the school terms were also provided by some schools, with one school setting up a 'rock academy' where low achieving pupils got together with high achieving pupils with an external agency and formed a rock group. This provided numerous potential benefits from self-esteem improvements and the utilisation of goal-setting behaviours.

Skills-based activities were also found amongst some schools: for instance one school ran an enterprise week which required pupils to design, cost and create a product from scratch. Another school provided 'learning to live' classes, such as cookery lessons, to equip pupils with life skills. This focus on life skills is also something implemented by other schools with financial literacy and work guidance a focus.

The best examples of enrichment experiences also had a secondary objective within them. For instance, some schools also embedded opportunities for enrichment within the taught curriculum. In one school, children mentioned enjoying 'topic' lessons which had provided opportunities to visit local restaurants and Cardiff Castle. In another physical activities

The breadth of experience I think, tends to be narrower than perhaps other children might have, I think that it is very important to develop that aspect of it

Deputy Head



such as sports and activities were used to engage pupils in their learning: for example, a surfing trip was used as a prompt for creative writing.

Some enrichment activities had a secondary goal of addressing social-emotional needs. Art and music therapy was used by some schools to help with anger management, and other interventions were aimed at helping children learn to play together. Other activities attempted to forge closer links with the local community by inviting them to take part in them with the pupils.

1.7.2 Local community

Schools attempted to interact with the local community in order to provide enrichment activities. One school ensured that there was a representative of the local community on the staff who acted as a mentor to the pupils. Other examples include running learn to play sessions for mothers and fathers, which encouraged parents to engage in play activities with their children, and the setting up of a women only play group in a heavily Somalian area.

1.8 Listening to disadvantaged learners and provide opportunities for them to play a full part in the school's life

Schools can ensure that they are allowing disadvantaged pupils to have a voice in their school life by giving them the opportunity to provide feedback as to what sort of input they would like and how they learn. They can also more broadly conduct questionnaires of the wider pupil population, and support the creation of school councils and other mechanisms to give pupils a voice.

The majority of schools had some form of attitudinal and behavioural survey set up to monitor pupil's emotional well-being to inform the way they are taught and the way teachers interact with them more broadly. One school ran focus groups, and others ensured that students were given ownership of certain areas of the schools. Schools also provided informal and formal ways of staff directly communicating with pupils, through the use of counsellors, pupil participation and welfare officers and restorative approaches. Finally one school ensured pupils had a voice in disputes by offering peer mediation. There was no substantial discussion of how pupils were able to influence curriculum design or mention of school run councils, although this does not necessarily suggest that no school was promoting these.

1.8.1 Pupil surveys and groups

The use of tools such as the N-Bar and the Pupil Attitudes to School and Self (PASS) surveys to collect data on pupil's attitudes towards themselves, attendance and their emotional status is commonplace amongst schools. These surveys were then used to inform the school's provision of support for individual pupils, with many pupils joining specific nurture groups in one school, and class teachers are briefed on the specific needs of pupils. Staff thought of these surveys as particularly useful as they helped identify pupils who needed extra support who weren't obviously misbehaving or standing out from other pupils. There was one example of a school utilising focus

groups to examine pupil's experience of the school. Finally, one school also conducted parental surveys to gauge their views on the school.

1.8.2 Formal and informal communication

The best schools provided many points of contact for pupils. Schools had set up formal contact points through the pupils classroom or form teachers and one school used their heads of houses in this role. The use of counsellors to monitor the socio-emotional health and to provide a point of contact for pupils was also important across schools. Pupils were at some schools also able to go to pupil participation officers or the student welfare officer if they wanted to have informal discussions about any difficulties.

1.8.3 Pupil ownership of specific area of the school

At one of the schools visited the school had allowed pupils to design and paint their main hall and canteen area. This was particularly important as it allowed pupils to have direct ownership of this area and created a sense of community around this area.

1.9 Engaging parents and carers of disadvantaged learners

Schools regularly rely on parents to provide additional support to their pupils, either through providing home environments and instilling skills and behaviours that are conducive to learning, or through providing more direct support with learning. However, a lack of parental engagement and skills often acts as a significant barrier for learning for disadvantaged pupils. Case study schools designed interventions to bridge this barrier.

Estyn suggest that the engagement of parents in the schooling process can be driven by using a range of methods to communicate with parents, and may include face-to-face contact. Schools may also employ a parental liaison officer and attempt to drive engagement through creating a diverse range of ways to encourage parents into the school.

The majority of schools visited were going to great and creative lengths to attempt to engage parents and the wider community in the school. Many had varied means of communication to parents, employed staff with a remit to specifically engage parents, provided support for parents in their learning and had parents visiting the school campus for a diverse range of reasons. One school however had taken the view that the time lag of encouraging parents to fully support their children's education was too great and therefore focussed almost exclusively in engaging pupils.

1.9.1 Parental communications

Schools were communicating with parents in a variety of ways. Many used text messages to ensure that parents received their communications. They also distributed praise letters when their children succeeded and one school ensured that for every subject parents had a place they could look in their child's book to monitor their progress and achievement in the year so far. Face-to-face contact has also been encouraged with one school running



Obviously as a comprehensive you don't have parents at the gate, and that is a major concern, you don't necessarily see the parents you really need to see... so any way that we can get the parents in we do

Deputy Head



regular briefings of parents in the school hall. One school had also set up a Facebook page which parents and pupils could use to solve maths challenges together, allowing parents to engage with the school and their children's education without having to visit the school site.

1.9.2 Parental visits to school site

Creative ways of persuading parents to visit the school site and to engage with the school as an institution are seen across almost all case study schools. One aspect was the drive for parents to be involved in writing policies and being involved on committees for the school. One school asked parents to contribute towards the writing of behaviour, attendance and bullying policies, and another created a parent council to have input into key decisions made at the school. At this school a time-bank system was also created where parents who volunteered time at the school were given vouchers that could be exchanged locally.

Another aspect was the way that schools encouraged parents to visit to attend lessons. One school particularly credits a 'curriculum morning' for turning around their relations with the local community and parents. Here children wrote personalised invitations to their parents to an event at the school. Parents were able to visit the school and observe any lesson they wished, regardless of whether their child was part of the lesson or not. From this point staff noticed an improvement in attendance of parent evenings and other events. Other schools also allow parents to view lessons.

Schools are also attempting to ensure that relationships are built with parents from as early a stage as possible. One school for instance suggested that this was one of the primary reasons for building a nursery on site. At another school they invite children considered to be at risk and their parents from their feeder primary schools to visit the school and acclimatise themselves early in Year 6. This helps the children to transition, and improves contact with parents. These parents were then invited for regular coffee mornings before the transition to discuss any issues they may have had.

1.9.3 Family liaison officers

Family liaison officers were employed by the majority of schools to manage the relationship between parents and the school. Their particular focus was to run the types of events discussed above, and to ensure that they fully understood the situations that individual pupils faced at home and to liaise with agencies about these circumstances. For instance, one school's officer works with families in need, would make home visits, and would bring parents to parent evening to ensure that they attend.

1.9.4 Parental qualifications and coaching

The aim of many of the schools in engaging parents was to improve the way that they support their children through their education. To that end a number of schools provided the means for parents to take qualifications that they may have missed themselves as a pupil. For instance, most case study

schools offered the opportunity for parents to study towards a maths GCSE. In one school a specific 'parent hub' has been created which regularly runs workshops to equip parents with key skills, including accredited courses and practical skills.

Some of the schools visited also provide opportunities for parents to learn how to play with their children in a mutually beneficial way. In one school family learning sessions are run by learning support assistants who teach parents how to read and play with their children. This aspect of both reading with their children and playing with them is hoped to engage parents with their child's development, and also to encourage them to visit the school's campus.

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

Schools can engage in a range of activities to develop their staff with Estyn suggesting that schools carry out investment in training for their leaders, teachers, support staff and governors, ensure that all of their approaches are regularly reviewed against data and pupil outcomes, promote a culture of sharing good practice within and beyond the school, select a member of the senior leadership team to coordinate the strategy for disadvantaged pupils within the school, and ensure that staff feel supported in their work.

Schools were strong on the development of staff through the use of teaching trios, inset days, twilight sessions and self-reflection. They also regularly reviewed data against pupil targets as discussed earlier. Some schools had interesting ways of sharing good practice within the schools and were visiting other schools to learn about best practice. Some of the case study schools were also ensuring that teachers were promoting aspirational targets for their pupils. All schools also had appointed a member of the senior leadership team with responsibility for monitoring performance of disadvantaged pupils and there were examples of schools instigating specific working practices to support teachers and other members of staff in their work.

1.10.1 Specific training for staff

The use of teaching trios was strongly advocated amongst most case study schools. Some schools cited research they had looked into to set up these triads, and schools used PDG funding to provide the capacity within the staff body to allow these trios to function. These trios helped staff develop by providing opportunities to view other teaching styles, being observed themselves with input from the other teachers to improve lesson planning, and it improves the quality of feedback that teachers are able to give and also to receive. The use of Iris technology was also promoted by one school with lessons videoed and teachers asked to reflect on their performance. Teachers then set actions to improve the level of challenge in their lessons.

Staff have been sent on specific training days to improve skills. For instance one school was sending their deputy headteacher on a training course on

research methodologies. Members of the senior leadership team at multiple schools had been trained in the use of data management software, and best practise for utilising data. At one school the training and subsequent deployment of Learning Support Assistants was particularly relevant for their strategy in closing the gap. The structures in place at these schools allowed them to send their teachers and other staff on CPD courses as they had hired additional staff to fill the gaps when they away on these courses. Learning Support Assistants attended teachers' conferences and visited other schools, and one shadowed the Family Liaison Officer to better understand how to build family liaison work into her role. The school not only invested in the training of Learning Support Assistants but also gave them significant responsibilities: for example, they were responsible for monitoring the pupil outcomes for interventions they ran and suggesting ways of enhancing the effectiveness of interventions. The Learning Support Assistants felt empowered by their expertise and responsibility: one for example, was training herself in her free time using a Pie Corbett textbook.

1.10.2 Inter and intra school learning

The encouragement of staff to visit other schools to observe good practice, attend conferences, and share ideas was commonplace amongst all of the schools visited. For instance, when setting up their data systems one school visited a number of schools to get a sense of what the different methods were. Another school had hosted a conference on methods for closing the gap, where contributors from other schools were invited.

At one school a member of staff attended a meeting of emotional literacy support assistants from across other schools. At these meetings they discussed best practice and creative ideas for activities to support their interventions. It also acted as a way for this member of staff to receive emotional support from individuals undertaking similar work.

At many schools best practice was also shared effectively internally, with the best schools putting structures in place in terms of set times in the terms and infrastructure to promote this. Best practise was shared through inset days and at one school 'twilight sessions' were run on a regular basis. These were sessions where teachers came together to look at each other's books. They looked at the quality of differentiation, opportunities for pupils to apply their literacy and numeracy skills, and the quality of marking. This approach was developed through looking at the Sutton Trust Toolkit which suggests that it is one of the most cost effective ways of helping disadvantaged pupils. Another case study school set up a 'learning forum', an online forum where best practice was shared amongst staff. For instance, if a member of staff had been out on a course, visited another school, or read a particularly useful bit of research they wrote a summary of it on this forum and distributed it to other members of staff.

1.10.3 Teachers raising aspirations

At some schools teachers were encouraged to set aspirational targets for pupils. In particular, one school used data from the Fischer Family Trust which is a non-profit organisation that provides data and analyses to all schools and LAs in England and Wales. Their estimates are used by teachers to inform the setting of ambitious and aspirational targets for students.

1.10.4 Supporting staff

Of the schools visited a number had instigated practises to specifically support staff in their work. This particularly focussed on providing time set aside from the curriculum for teachers to come together to discuss concerns they were having with classes or other key issues. At another school there was 'Circle time' which provided teachers with specialist counsellors to discuss any challenges they were facing in their working environment.

This school had also set up a staff survey to monitor staff wellbeing, with the data used to inform an action plan for senior leaders to implement. Other schools stated that they put the development and wellbeing of their staff as a key objective of their school strategy and aimed to improve small details of staff experience at work. For instance they streamlined behavioural policies and were working on reducing the amount of paperwork that teachers went through. At other schools the strategy for staff wellbeing wasn't discussed as much.

1.11 Areas for further consideration

- Staff in the case study schools are working in very challenging circumstances. Senior Leadership Teams had a varying degree of focus on nurturing staff and protecting their wellbeing. A greater focus on staff wellbeing may be useful in schools where this is not already a priority. Both formal mechanisms, such as staff surveys, and informal mechanisms, such as group counselling and discussions, appear to be helpful in supporting and listening to staff.
- There was evidence across the case study schools of staff drawing on evidence from academic literature, the Sutton Trust Toolkit, and approaches based on their own and other schools' experience. However, even in the most outward-looking schools, teachers expressed the view that they would like the opportunity to observe practice in other schools to a much greater degree, while current practice focussed on observations of colleagues in their own school.
- All case study schools were engaging with parents to some degree, but at least one school expressed the view that it was a low priority because it was so challenging to do. Given the potential for significant gains, schools should develop strategies to engage with parents, even if the benefits will only be realised over the longer term and may not affect short-term strategies. The case study schools provide examples of engaging effectively with parents in difficult circumstances in a range of ways, and through various modes, including effective use of social media.

- The number of Learning Support Assistants employed by schools has proliferated under the Pupil Deprivation Grant. The degree of specialisation, training and responsibility LSAs have varies considerably by school. It may be worth schools considering whether they can invest in LSA training and provide them with more responsibility so they can be deployed most effectively, and maximum value derived from the PDG.
- While School Leadership Teams were abreast of academic evidence and approaches, this knowledge about how best to close the attainment gap did not always permeate all levels of school staff. Sessions to encourage learning across teaching staff, including LSAs, may be useful to spread this knowledge.
- Case study schools were all investing in ways of teachers observing each other's teaching so they had opportunities to gain feedback on their own teaching styles and observe others. There appeared to be less focus on peer reviewing book marking and providing feedback to pupils in most schools. Given the potentially high impact of effective feedback for a low cost this may be an area worth further consideration in driving up standards.
- Case study schools were providing regular and ad hoc enrichment opportunities for pupils and their families. However, some schools were building this into a systematic 'Experience Model' to ensure pupils benefit from a full range of cultural and life experiences; other schools built these opportunities into the curriculum to derive maximum value from these experiences (for example, using them to inspire creative writing, help with behaviour management and so on). More consideration about how best to structure these opportunities may be of value.
- Schools are engaged with their local communities and local networks to varying degrees. Greater engagement with other schools, charities and local bodies may help to tap into external resources and additional budget, increase opportunities to share learning, and offer the scope to engage with local communities more.



Case Studies



2 Case Studies

2.1 Herbert Thompson Primary School

2.1.1 School context and key issues

Herbert Thompson is a large primary school which runs from Reception to Year 6 and includes a nursery on site. The school is situated in a disadvantaged area: a high proportion of pupils are eFSM (56%) in comparison with both the local area and Wales, and 10% of children are on the child protection register. Some 26% of children come from minority ethnic groups, which exceeds the Welsh average by some margin, although rates of English as an Additional Language are no higher than Wales as a whole.

The headteacher stressed that the school's challenging circumstances brought a number of advantages, including access to additional funding and support, and attracting more committed and high quality teachers.

2.1.2 Strategies used to close the gap

The school's motto – 'Find your talents and let them grow, be the person you'd like to know' – encapsulates the strategy: the school encourages staff, parents and pupils to have high aspirations for pupils and it has a strong focus on promoting wellbeing and relationships across the school community.

The strategy is underpinned by approaches to working with:

- School staff, with the intention that staff have high levels of wellbeing, have a positive mindset about children's potential/subscribe to the school's vision, and that structures and systems allow staff to develop excellent teaching and leadership skills;
- Parents, with the intention of building relationships, developing parents' skills so they can effectively support their children's learning, and involving parents in school life;
- Pupils, with the aim of promoting wellbeing and good behaviour, and providing emotional and social support, so they can achieve their full potential.

2.1.3 Key activities to close the gap

The school has a clear vision about the approaches and systems it uses to help all children fulfil their potential, and this vision permeates the school staff; members of staff consistently highlighted common features in their approach that were effective in tackling the attainment gap. At the same

time, staff emphasised that it was the *combination* of a set of inter-dependent activities, rather than any single initiative, that was so effective.

Key elements of the approach include systems to track behaviour and attainment, with clear lines of responsibility at every level. Meetings twice a year between teachers, LSAs, and the SLT member responsible for Inclusion allow the school to act quickly on progress data so that the curriculum is tailored regularly to pupils' needs. Behaviour management data is monitored on an ongoing basis: pupils are set individual targets for improvements when behaviour issues occur that are monitored by class teachers and the SLT. However, behaviour management is not just punitive: restorative approaches and professional counsellors offer support for pupils and families to improve wellbeing.

Staff's personal career objectives, including the objectives for LSAs, are tied into the schools' overarching strategies for closing the gap.

The school invests in the wellbeing and career development of its staff, including its LSAs. Staff breakfast together every morning in 'circle time' sessions facilitated by a professional counsellor. An annual staff survey monitors wellbeing and the findings inform the school's strategy to improve staff wellbeing each year. The headteacher emphasises the resilience needed by staff working in challenging circumstances.

The school invests in training its staff. Initiatives include twice-yearly 'coaching triplet' lesson observations, which aim to develop both teaching and leadership skills, and internal leadership courses. The school invests in training LSAs so they can specialise in particular areas. A few members of staff highlighted the effective deployment and up-skilling of LSAs as a particularly effective part of the school's strategy. LSAs have clear responsibilities in relation to closing the gap, such as monitoring the effectiveness of the interventions they run and suggesting ways of improving their impact. LSAs are highly motivated as a result.

The school reaches out to the local community and parents in a variety of ways. Two family engagement offers and a counsellor provide support for families in need. Initiatives to encourage parents into schools operate on an ongoing basis: for example, an on-site Café is run by local parents. Courses to improve parents' skills are run on a regular basis, including accredited courses and practical skills training. Open doors policies in early years help to encourage parents into school, and allow teachers to role model positive communication and behaviour management strategies. Family learning sessions are run by LSAs and coach parents on effective techniques for reading with their children. A wide range of other enrichment activities operates to provide families and children with experiences and opportunities to spend time together.

Pupils are happy and appreciate the counselling services available. They know there are places they can go where information 'will go no further' and they can discuss problems openly. They are enthusiastic about the range of

activities they can access through extended school activities, and extra-curricular activities at school.

2.1.4 The impact of activities to date

The school's close monitoring of behaviour and attainment data, as well as intervention-level outcomes, means they can effectively monitor their impact. Data analysis has been used to improve some interventions: for example, data from the school's behaviour management system showed that a high number of behaviour incidents occurred immediately after lunch, and that running literacy and numeracy interventions at other times of the day enhanced their effectiveness. LSAs will in future be responsible for monitoring the impact of the interventions they run and identifying ways to enhance them.

Staff are highly motivated and committed to the school as a result of the investment in their wellbeing and development.

The headteacher reports that parents' aspirations for their children are shifting over time, with more applying for higher performing schools in the area rather than the nearest choice. The headteacher also reports that the attainment gap is closing.

2.1.5 Areas for improvement

Teachers appreciated the opportunities for internal lesson observations and feedback, and welcomed being a hub of advice for other schools in the area. However, more experienced teachers would welcome the opportunity to observe practices in other schools.

2.2 Mount Stuart Primary School

2.2.1 School context and key issues

Mount Stuart is a primary school of circa 400 pupils which runs from Reception to Year 6 and includes a nursery on site. The school is situated in a disadvantaged area: they have a three year average of 30% of children eligible for free school meals. However, their main focus is on the very high proportion of children from ethnic minority backgrounds (95%). Some 75% of pupils speak English as an additional language and there are around 21 languages spoken at the school. The main communities are Somali (38%) and Arabic speaking (30%) and within this are the Yemeni community. Currently 30% of pupils are on school action plans or on the SEN register. Among children with EAL a large number of pupils have early acquisition challenges.

The headteacher explained that his attitude to closing the gap was not driven by simply pushing resources towards those children who are eligible for free school meals, and that he believed that within his school other forms of disadvantage were as significant as or more significant than eFSM status. This was driven by data showing that historically children on free school meals at this school had outperformed the rest of the pupil population. The headteacher links this to other forms of disadvantage found at the school. In particular he points to the high proportion of children with English as an additional language. He additionally suggests that there are a large number of pupils living on the borders of poverty who would not benefit if this was the policy.

a e This was driven by the fact that historically children on free school meals had outperformed other students at the school, , and a belief that there were

2.2.2 Strategies used to close the gap

The school's core purpose– '*Learning and Living Together*' – encapsulates the strategy: the school is focussed on creating a sense of community, as well as excellence in education. They take a whole school approach to interventions not specifically aiming to 'close the gap'.

The strategy is underpinned by approaches to working on:

- Community relations, with the aim of engaging parents to become more involved in their children's learning and improved interaction between parents and the school;
- Aspirations, with the intention of improving children's life experiences, raising standards and increasing pupils' confidence in their learning;
- Literacy, with the aim of supporting wider learning, ensuring that children are equipped with appropriate knowledge in their literacy,

with fewer children coming through with gaps in their knowledge, and reducing attainment gap.

2.2.3 Key activities to close the gap

The school has a clear understanding of how it wants to face the challenges its pupils face in achieving their potential. Members of staff highlight similar features when discussing the core challenges the schools faces and the methods they are using to tackle them.

One of the key elements of the approach is the focussing of curriculum interventions onto one single intensive phonics intervention. This is the Read Write Inc course which takes place at the start of every day. It involves phonics being taught in setted groups which allows for differentiated learning, and importantly for every child to be able to succeed in their learning. It offers a more rigorous approach to teaching phonics and aims to ensure that children do not go through the school with gaps in their knowledge unaddressed. They believe one large scale intervention will be more successful than the “slightly fractured” set of phonics interventions used in the past. Every six weeks the children are tested and if there is sufficient improvement they move up a group. External consultants also monitor the progress of the intervention and give training to staff on delivering the program.

The school invests in training its staff in other ways as well. Initiatives include ‘coaching triplet’ lesson observations, which aim to develop both teaching and leadership skills. This is enabled by the funding provided by the Pupil Deprivation Grant, which has enabled the school to increase the teaching capacity to cover these lessons. The school also runs twilight sessions which entails teachers coming together to look at each other’s books. They look for the quality of differentiation in marking, opportunities for pupils to apply their literacy and numeracy skills, and the quality of marking. The school is particularly focussed on improving the feedback that children receive as evidence shows this has one of the largest impacts on closing the attainment gap.

The school aims to increase aspirations amongst children and to look after their emotional state. The school runs an enterprise week once a year where groups of children are given a budget to create a project which they then have to sell. They source and make the product and then present to the deputy head and head teacher. They have also forged relationships with a local solicitors firm who visit the school to provide a reading and mentoring scheme. They provided a number of school trips in the local area which they feel were important as many children within the school may not have the same breadth of experiences outside of school as other children from different areas. The school also ran the Pupil Attitudes to School and Self (PASS) Survey which aims to identify attitudes to attendance and pupils’ perceptions of themselves so support can be put in place. Specifically, pupils may subsequently be asked to join ‘nurture groups’ run by the SENCO and teachers can use PASS to inform their interactions with students in lessons.

Aspirations are also part of the reasons the school has focussed on improving relationships within the community and predominantly with the parents of children who attend the school. Staff mentioned that previously there has been very low attendance at parents' evenings and open days, and that they felt that parents haven't been fully able to support their children with their school work. To that end the school launched curriculum mornings where the school opens all of the classrooms for parents to visit whatever the age of their child. The school asked children to write personalised letters of invitation for their parents. The response was very positive and is seen as a turning point in the school's relationships with parents. Parents have also been invited to form groups to write policies on security, behaviour and bullying for the school.

The school has started a nursery which it hopes will enable parents to form a closer bond to the school. Parents are encouraged to learn with their children in this environment, with the school promoting play between parents and children. The school also employs bilingual assistants from the local community who act as a conduit between the community and the school. It is hoped that these assistants will additionally act as positive role models for the children.

2.2.4 The impact of activities to date

The school monitors the percentage of pupils in each setted phonics class from Read Write Inc. The data shows a consistent trend of pupils moving up groups over the school year, which may indicate the impact that Read Write Inc is having on their phonics ability. For instance in Reception year 100% of pupils started off in Set A (the lowest group) and by the end of the Spring Half Term just 43% remained in this group. Of further interest is the data showing that for Year 4s 28% started in either Set B or Set C, and by the end of the Spring half term all of these pupils had moved into Set D or above. This indicates that Read Write Inc is working for even those pupils with long term phonic difficulties.

Staff report higher attendances at parent evenings and open mornings as success for the parental engagement activities. The results of the PASS survey cannot yet be judged as it is in its first year of implementation.

However, staff are also still focussed on areas that are more difficult to quantify such as a pupils immediate well-being and other areas that aren't always completely measurable.

2.2.5 Areas for improvement

The use of action research to inform decisions was well understood by the Headteacher and Deputy head, with the Sutton Trust toolkit name-checked as well as the University of Exeter and accessing via the Welsh Government. However, this was not prevalent through all staff members spoken to.

2.3 Pencoed Comprehensive

2.3.1 School context and key issues

Pencoed is a secondary school of circa 900 pupils. The school is situated in a semi-rural area with a lot of access to local amenities. There are very few EAL pupils (only two on roll at time of visit) and there is a 15% rate of pupils on free school meals. In previous years attendance has been an issue at around 90%. In 2010 it was put into the 'follow up' category by Estyn and given a band five, and the school was ranked 217th out of 222 schools in Wales. In response, the school conducted a full review and subsequently implemented a wide range of changes. The main focus has been instilling a greater culture of accountability amongst staff and incorporating the use of data throughout the school. The school also has a Multiple Learning Difficulty Base within the school for pupils in Years 7-10.

The approach to closing the attainment gap is to focus on individual children who are failing to meet expectations rather than focussing funding entirely on children eligible for free school meals. However, they do expect this approach to disproportionately aid FSM-eligible pupils.

2.3.2 Strategies used to close the gap

The school's primary strategy for improving their school performance since 2010, and closing the attainment gap has been to improve the accountability processes within the school, and to put in place a comprehensive data analysis system.

Beyond accountability and data there are also a number of other focusses:

- Attendance and aspirations, with the aim of improving the life experiences of children and raising their standards;
- Socio-emotional support, to improve pupils' experiences at school, identify appropriate interventions and aid teachers in understanding any difficulties that pupils are having;
- Parental engagement, with the intention of improving the support that children receive at home and parental support of school policies;
- Literacy and numeracy interventions, with the aim of supporting wider learning, ensuring that children are equipped with appropriate knowledge in their literacy, with fewer children coming through with gaps in their knowledge, and reducing attainment gap.

2.3.3 Key activities to close the gap

All members of staff spoken to are aware of the prevailing attitude towards data that the school has implemented since the Estyn inspection of 2010. They credit this for the improvement in attainment of those eligible for free school meals. The overall strategy involved is for multiple levels of staff to be

aware of, and responsible for, individual pupils. These levels of accountability attempt to ensure all pupils are known individually through data, as well as on a personal level and therefore cannot be left behind. Middle leaders in particular have been expected to do more with data, and are expected to know more about what is going on in their departments than they had previously. For instance, the Heads of House role used to be a pastoral role, but there is now an expectation that they will analyse data for standards reviews (termly senior leader meeting to discuss specific groups of children).

The school also makes good use of benchmarking data, and has support from external bodies in this, in particular the Fischer Family trust. Their estimates are used by teachers to inform the setting of ambitious and aspirational targets for students.

This has also been facilitated through termly meetings of senior leadership to discuss pupil data and performance and to look at specific groups. These meetings are used to form the basis of the 'challenge' mentality that the school have instigated amongst staff. The improvement in accountability structures, performance management and focussed use of data is used to challenge both teachers to improve results, and for pupils to take better control of their learning. This is done through meetings between teachers and pupils where their performance is discussed and firm targets set and monitored. The school have asked for greater input from the governing body on this as well, with governors encouraged to visit the school as often as possible and have a greater understanding of the data that is generated. Governors were also invited to form a strategic working group to meet termly to consider strategic planning and evaluation processes.

Literacy and numeracy interventions are also involved in closing the attainment gap. The school uses the Star Reader program which involves 20 minutes of reading every day. Star is a competitive programme, with prizes won for number of words read and quizzes on books. The progress that children make via this intervention is tracked by the librarian: non-FSM and e-FSM pupils are compared, and further interventions can be implemented if children are falling behind.

The BKS B program is a numeracy and literacy program which first identifies gaps in children's knowledge. If there are gaps children are given a diagnostic and interventions are put in place to meet these needs. Interventions are carried out in small setted groups and pupils explained they liked the fact that they could have things explained to them, and were less nervous about asking for help than in normal classes. Pupils move up BKS B groups and will eventually graduate off the programme. Pupils said they enjoyed the success of moving up groups, although some were concerned at the prospect of losing the additional support the program gave them. Specific maths tutoring is also in place to help those struggling and this is mainly aimed at FSM pupils.

The school has also put in place interventions aimed at improving attendance, including hiring a Pupil Participation Officer. This role supports

across a number of functions, including taking children who are struggling out of classes for one-to-one support, running out of school clubs, organising mock interviews, CV writing training and emotional support. It is hoped that this role will ensure children enjoy school more, improve academic results and help with socio-emotional development, and thus improve attendance. Attendance officers have been employed to track attendance, and family engagement officers work on specific cases to improve attendance. It is these individuals' specific knowledge of family situations that is hoped will improve attendance.

This awareness of family situations is something the school is trying to instil from before children even enter the school. The most at-risk children and their parents are encouraged to visit the school while in Year 6, through the 'Helping Hands' programme they run. The family engagement officer has also run reading mornings in primary schools for parents and their children. The school has aimed to improve communication with parents, sending praise letters for children as well as text messages to communicate successes. The school also has a partnership with a local Further Education College who run sessions to support maths GCSE for parents so that they can support their children at home.

The school is also trialling the Successful Lives program which is coaching designed to encourage children to take more responsibility for their learning. It is hoped it will improve resilience, goal-setting behaviours, and instil the importance of effort. This is backed up by yearly 'Stop Weeks' which are weeks off curriculum focussed on socio-emotional skills, interview practise and CV development.

2.3.4 The impact of activities to date

Data provided by the school shows that the school has been successful in closing the attainment gap; in 2008 there was close to a 35 percentage point difference between pupils achieving the level two threshold (a volume of qualifications equivalent to the volume of 5 GCSEs at Grade A* - C) between the school total and FSM pupils. In 2014 this had closed to a ten percentage point change. This is impressive in that the level FSM pupils are at is five percentage points higher than the 2008 whole school figure (50% vs. 45%). This indicates that the interventions and changes made since 2008 have affected the FSM pupils disproportionately to the whole school population.

2.3.5 Areas for improvement

The use of action research does not permeate through staff, with many preferring their own experience and visiting other schools.

2.4 Maesteg

2.4.1 School context and key issues

Maesteg secondary school provides an education for 1200 pupils aged 11-18. Some 27% of pupils are eligible for free school meals¹ (e-FSM) and 17 are looked after (LAC). Currently there is a 20% attainment gap between e-FSM and non-FSM children. The relatively high proportion of e-FSM and LAC pupils means the school receives significant funding via the Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG) of £245,000 which the school headteacher views as essential to their work tackling the attainment gap: “without the PDG we wouldn’t be able to half the amount we do.”

Staff define disadvantage as a lack of educational support at home and low expectations of pupils, from both parents and themselves. Teachers feel a particular barrier for children is parents’ views that education is done in school, not at home.

2.4.2 Strategies used to close the gap

Closing the gap is at the heart of the school’s strategy. They hope to achieve this through:

- **Working with pupils to raise aspirations and develop their meta cognition skills.** This is embedded in their mission statement: “to raise self-esteem and develop “Learning to Learn” skills in order to become life-long learners.”
- **Working with staff to help them stretch FSM pupils,** to help them achieve the above goals.
- **Working with parents so that they engage with school life** and have the confidence to assist with their child’s learning at home.
- **Working with local primary schools** to help embed some of the strategies employed by the school into children’s learning at an earlier stage. They work in particular on literacy strategies.
- **Interrogating data to assess pupil need and develop interventions.** As well as regularly monitoring pupils’ progress to improve interventions, the use of secondary research is also integral to how the school tackles closing the gap.

2.4.3 Key activities to close the gap

The school exudes a culture of innovation and staff are passionate about closing the gap. There is a real culture of action research, with staff members actively looking at the literature to seek new ideas to react to the school’s needs. Every new initiative is then piloted to see if it should be rolled out to the rest of the school. For instance, following work with a

¹ Compare to national average

pedagogical company and visits to a school in Somerset, iPads were given to all year 7 pupils. They are currently in the pilot stage and at the end of the year will see if the initiative has worked or not.

This culture of research runs through the levels of the school. One senior member of staff said that he 'trawls' Twitter to find appropriate evidence. Indeed, this is how he came across the Iris Connect technology used to film lessons, in order to help train staff. A Teaching Assistant too commented that she will Google research to try and find different methods of explaining something to a pupil.

One of the approaches that the school has taken on board, is the Growth Mindset work of Carol Dweck. This is the idea that you can improve people's ideas of what they can achieve. Therefore, it is raising their expectations of what they can achieve. To translate this idea to the classroom, in order to have an impact, they looked to marginal gains theory and the idea that little things can come together to make a big difference. The school has laid out 5 ideas that teachers can implement in their classrooms, to help underachieving pupils. For instance one is to mark underachieving pupils' books first, when the teacher has more energy. As well as informing their own school activities with this approach, the school speaks to external audiences about this work. This year they held a conference on the topic.

Parental engagement is a key part of the school's strategy to raise attainment. Education classes are given to parents to help them engage with school life, as well as give them the confidence to help their children with school work. Several parents have gained GCSEs through these lessons.

A family engagement officer also works with those families who are facing the most difficulties. Part of the advantage of her role is that she provides a link from the families to the school, which allows teachers to understand what their pupils are going home to. Some teachers have started to shadow the engagement officer whilst she makes family visits, which, as one teacher comment allows you to: "walk in a child's shoes for a while." It therefore means that teachers can tailor their teaching and behaviour management accordingly.

The engagement officer's role is also to improve attendance. Every Friday she co-ordinates a group of staff members to make contact with all unauthorised and authorised absentees. For those who are unauthorised, they will visit the family homes to see where a child is and take them into school if necessary.

The officer also links parents to other services. Often, she is the one they can trust and therefore she acts as a good intermediary between the parent and another service. Furthermore, she can also introduce parents to teachers, to help engage them with school life.

Beyond parental engagement, the school organises activities to promote family learning and to provide enriching family experiences. For example, it runs a reading café where parents and children come to school for breakfast

and to read together. Recent family excursions have included a trip to an ice hockey match in Cardiff and surfing. Pupils write up their experience of trips, therefore also working on their literacy skills. Children and parents have reacted positively to these initiatives. One student described how his literacy skills had improved and how the knowledge that he was improving made him “very happy.”

Specific interventions have been implemented specifically for LAC and FSM pupils. When interventions are for all pupils, LAC and FSM pupils are tracked to assess progress within these programmes. Interventions for students include a focus on literacy and numeracy development. The school's literacy and numeracy framework has clear initiatives to raise attainment in literacy and numeracy across all years. This includes the introduction of three extra lessons of numeracy for Key Stage Three pupils, which is taught by both specialist and non-specialist members of staff. This is so that numeracy can be approached differently by non-specialists. It also ensures consistency in the numeracy approach, across the school. Non specialist teachers in these areas have been equipped with the tools (such as video tutorials) to be able to assist pupils.

Technology is also put to good use. The school's popular Facebook page posts information about numeracy tests and sets daily maths challenges for pupils and parents. All Year 7s this year have been given iPads, as part of a pilot. These are used to access apps such as Maths Watch or Socrative, which allow pupils to work through exercises, as well as revise topics. As well as being an accessible medium for young people, the digitisation allows teachers to easily gather data from the app, to measure student's progress. This can be immediate so teachers can see who is getting more questions wrong at a particular point, so a teacher could go over to that pupil and assist them with their work. The use of apps also ensures that a consistent approach to literacy or numeracy is used in the school. Furthermore, the iPad ensures that pupils have a computer at home – something which not all pupils already have.

A numeracy competition, written by Big Maths, takes place in tutorial lessons. Rewards are given to the most improved student and most improved class.

Afterschool clubs are also a key part of engaging students, as well as helping to give them a well-rounded education. Clubs include art and music, as well as a girls' hair and beauty club, where more senior pupils teach their younger peers, thereby promoting female leadership and increased self-esteem. The latter was introduced to address the poor behaviour and low self-esteem of girls. As part of the same initiative, the school is looking to work with mothers to increase their self-esteem, as the school believes this is where the girls' low self-esteem comes from. The group has increased the girl's confidence. One teacher gave an example of one pupil, with previously low confidence, who recently gave a talk at a conference in front of the Welsh Government – something she would not have done before.

To ensure that the right pupils are receiving appropriate interventions, the school has a management information system to track pupils' progress. Test results are recorded. The school also surveys pupils and parents themselves as well as use the Pupil Attitudes to School and Self (PASS) results.

Staff training is also fundamental to the school's strategy. Lessons are filmed using Iris technology and teachers, working in triads, analyse the footage and then set themselves targets to improve how they teach, focusing in particular on how they are challenging FSM pupils in lessons. The triads also focus on an aspect of the Sutton Trust Toolkit (such as feedback or met-cognition) and discuss how they can use learning from here, to improve their lessons. After piloting the actions they discuss in their triads, they then rerecord their lessons to see if these actions have had an impact.

2.4.4 The impact of activities to date

Many of the interventions at the time of the visit had not been running for an extended period of time and therefore impact data had not been collected. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the literacy programme has improved accuracy – particularly in punctuation. The head also reported that more generally, the 20% attainment gap is closing.

There was lots of anecdotal evidence to show that interventions are having an impact, for instance, the increased confidence of the pupils discussed earlier or pupil we met was very positive about how the literacy interventions he was taking part in has improved his confidence, as well as his attainment.

2.5 Ferndale

2.5.1 School context and key issues

Ferndale is the smallest comprehensive secondary school in Rhondda Cynon Taff, (RCT) with 670 pupils. The school is situated in a valley with high levels of unemployment, following the closure of three mines in the area. Some 38% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, the highest in RCT. The number of LAC children varies greatly but currently it's around 11%.

The head defines disadvantage as both material - some pupils are unable to do their homework in the evening because there is no electricity at home - and aspirational. Many parents of the school believe that education can make no difference at all. Pupils also lack confidence that someone smarter and from a richer family will get the job they need. Therefore, as one teacher commented they hold an attitude of "what's the point?" Many e-FSM pupils also have special educational needs.

Attendance is an issue at the school. There's a 2% FSM attendance gap (which is down from 8%, 3 years ago). However there is a much larger punctuality gap of 40% in terms of morning arrivals at school. Attendance is worse amongst girls because many girls stay at home to look after their family.

2.5.2 Strategies used to close the gap

The school focuses on the following areas, in order to help close the gap:

Raising attainment by setting high targets for pupils. Part of this is regular examination of pupils so that they become comfortable with exams.

Closing the attainment gap through giving pupils the experiences of middle class children.

Raising attendance. This is achieved by working with children, rather than parents. The school has identified that it would have generally more impact working with pupils rather than parents, as the time lag through working with parents, to then with children, would be too great.

Ensuring staff wellbeing and raising staff aspirations for the pupils.

All staff are aware of the strategy and that Ferndale wants to be one of the best schools at closing the gap. All staff meetings every morning helps with this. As one teacher said: "everyone knows the direction we're heading."

2.5.3 Key activities to date

One of tactics used to raise attainment at the school is to set challenging targets to stretch the pupils. As part of this, a culture of competition is fostered in the school. A house system was implemented, so that they "compete for everything" as the Head explained. This includes actively encourage pupils to take part in sporting competitions, even if this means

taking them out of lessons. The pupils are also regularly examined so that they are used to exams. Previously the school found that students would be fearful of exams and would often not turn up to exams because they didn't want to fail.

Raising literacy and numeracy are key areas of focus for the school in raising attainment. As well as bought initiatives such as Read, Write, Inc, the school has found that small group interventions have worked well. In particular the Restorative Action in Schools (RAIS) has been put to good effect in the effort to raise literacy levels. The restorative approach involves students articulating their thoughts on a subject whilst sitting in a circle. From this, classrooms are increasingly being set up so that they are circular in nature. For the literacy initiative pupils were identified through the analysis of attainment data, as being in need of a literacy intervention. A 20 minute slot was then identified during registration, where these pupils could work in small groups and discuss the books they were reading. This centred on two questions, from the RAIS approach: "What do you think happened" and "How do you think the character felt?" Moreover these questioned helped the students develop their emotional literacy levels. Observations from the staff was that many students find discussing their feelings difficult. Therefore the school thought that a way to do this was to first ask students to talk about characters in a book, which it is hoped will increase their ability to discuss their own feelings. Although no statistics were given, teachers reported that feedback from other staff members and pupils has been positive from this initiative.

Lesson environments are also tailored towards the pupils. For instance, class maths teachers are rotated every three weeks to ensure that those children who might not get along with one teacher, has the opportunity to be able to work with another who they may work with more easily.

The school has an onsite youth centre, with two full time youth workers. Activities are held including DJ lessons and basketball. The school is also very community focused. As well as being part of Community First (which is how the youth workers are funded), the school has placed itself in the heart of the community. For instance, they have recently established an on site nursery which the school hopes will engage parents in school life from when their child is a young age.

Innovation is within the school's culture and action research is embedded in everything they do. As the Head commented "staff are very reflective" and there seemed to be a real sense amongst all staff consulted of an enthusiasm to learn how to improve their teaching. They have looked to the Sutton Trust Toolkit to gain ideas for interventions, such as using personalised feedback and mixed ability sets. Emphasis is also put on developing meta cognition skills amongst pupils. However, some aspects of the toolkit they have proven less applicable for their school. For instance they believe that uniform does work. As the head commented: "when it's non-school uniform day, the kids don't turn up, because they don't have clothes." They also very much value learning support assistants because they are highly trained to work with children with specific needs in school.

The school uses data to great effect. Data is regularly monitored and analysed and the school is keen to develop its methods of data collection. The Deputy Head for instance is currently on a research methodology.

Closing the attainment gap is also a big focus for the school. By this, they predominately mean giving young people the chances in life that other children in the country are afforded are thereby “levelling the playing field” as the Head articulated. As part of this strategy and following a visit to a school in Tower Hamlets, London, the school now adopts an ‘experience model’. This says that each child should have the same experiences as children from middle class backgrounds, such as going to the seaside and visiting museums. Therefore they intend that each child that leaves Ferndale should have a list of these experiences under their belt.

The school take attendance very seriously. There is an attendance officer, who works closely with youth engagement officers, to raise the attendance and punctuality rates. They have different strategies in place for pupils with differing levels of attendance. Some of these strategies include letters homes to parents, working with youth engagement officers and circle time approaches. In the circle time, the young people will discuss why they might have been absent or late and then what they can do to remedy this. Feedback from the youth worker who works with pupils on circle time, says that attendance amongst this group worked with has “gone up massively”. They have also brought the culture of competition into the attendance strategy. Pupils know their attendance rates and classes compete on whose attendance is better. They do not give rewards for individuals as they feel that attendance should not be overly rewarded as it should be something that pupils do anyway. The school does not work directly with parents to improve attendance as they feel that this strategy would be too slow in changing the habits of their young people. Therefore the focus is with working with the young people themselves to improve their behaviour.

Because of the backgrounds of many children and the difficulties they face and therefore the impact this has on the teaching staff, who often deal with these issues ensuring staff wellbeing is essential for the school. In order to foster this wellbeing, the school has a number of strategies. They minimise paperwork and have systems in place to make life easier for teachers. The behaviour management is routine for instance. Therefore every teacher and child knows the repercussions when poor behaviour is demonstrated.

Raising aspirations amongst students, is also a key part of the school's strategy. They have recently started the Successful Lives programme which aims to raise aspirations and develop resilience within school children. The high grade targets also help with this.

2.5.4 Impact of activities to date

Many of the initiatives that were discussed during the time of visit, had only just started. However, anecdotal evidence from teachers suggests that these initiatives are working. For instance, as noted above, circle time has improved attendance greatly amongst certain students. The school's level 2

and level 2 plus literacy and numeracy scores are “surpassing targets” according to the school and they have been the most improved school in the area for the last two years.

2.6 Bryntirion Secondary School

Bryntirion school comprises 1040 pupils from ages 11-18. Of these pupils, 22% receive free school meals (FSM) and there are 9 looked after children. Currently, there is an attainment gap of 20%. Attendance is not as much of an issue here than in other schools, with attendance the highest in the borough.

The head defines disadvantage at the school, as not having the support at home to be able to achieve in school. Therefore, he sees closing the gap as plugging in the gaps of what support children are not receiving at home.

The school very much sees itself as a school where students can be themselves and that there is a culture of mutual respect between the staff and pupils.

2.6.1 Strategies used to close the gap

The school's main strategy is to **raise the aspirations** of both the pupils and teachers, so that pupils are stretched to achieve higher grades. This is achieved through setting higher grade targets, making staff accountable for these targets and monitoring achievement at regular intervals. The school's previous strategy was focussed on wellbeing, which although was beneficial for students, was not increasing their attainment. Although raising grades is currently the main focus, the school still sees itself as strong on pastoral care and offering a holistic education, therefore embodying the "we learn how to live" motto.

In order to bring FSM pupils up to a higher grade, the school ensures that all teachers understand who the FSM pupils are, so that they can be better supported in lessons. However, the head stressed that many families not eligible for FSM are not necessarily at more of an advantage than FSM families. There are also some students on FSM who are on A* and therefore don't need as much support as others. Therefore the school's aim is to target all children who are underachieving – not just those on free school meals.

2.6.2 Key activities to close the gap

Raising attainment in literacy and numeracy is a key activity for the school. The desired outcome is to raise standards in tests in KS3 to close the gap in KS4. During KS3, small groups are taken out of lessons to work on literacy and numeracy skills. Revision sessions are also key part of the strategy to raise attainment in this area. As well as having internal revision sessions, the school sent pupils on revision sessions at the University of Glamorgan, as well as the Central South Consortium.

The school found that some pupils did not have suitable places at home with which to do their homework. To help with this, the school library is often open after school, until 5pm, to allow students a place to work.

At KS4, students who are seen to not be achieving in literacy and numeracy, are asked to drop a GCSE subject. They are then given extra tutoring (by an external tutor who comes into school two days a week) in this time to raise their literacy and numeracy standards.

As part of the efforts to 'plug in the gaps' of support for children and young people at home, the school gives maths lessons to parents who need it, so that they are at the same level as their children. Therefore they are better equipped to help their children with homework.

The school is also focussed on developing pupils' meta-cognition skills. At the time of visit, a group of year 11 students had been on a learning performance day to improve their meta cognition skills.

In order to track the attainment of pupils, the school uses the SIMs management system. They find this very effective in tracking pupils. The school also gains data from the CAT4 results of year 6 pupils. This means that students are appropriately supported, as soon as they join the school. As part of this data collection – the school places great emphasis on gathering the views of learners. The 'pupil voice' initiative was started to gain the views of students, in order to deliver an education that is aligned with what they feel they need. The school have conducted surveys and focus groups amongst the students, to gain these views.

Students in year 11 are also assigned a mentor from the teaching staff (each mentor has 6 students). Students and mentors agree targets, which they then revisit regularly (usually once a fortnight).

As noted above, the school still has a strong focus on pastoral care and wellbeing. Various activities, such as art and music therapy are held for students, to work on behavioural issues such as anger management. These activities are also a chance for mixed ability students to be able to work together, therefore following the recommendation by the Sutton Trust that One successful example of this, is a Rock Academy, where they put low achieving students with high achieving students and they spend a week in the holidays, with an external agency, forming a rock group. Students also attend classes which equip them for life beyond academics, such as cookery classes.

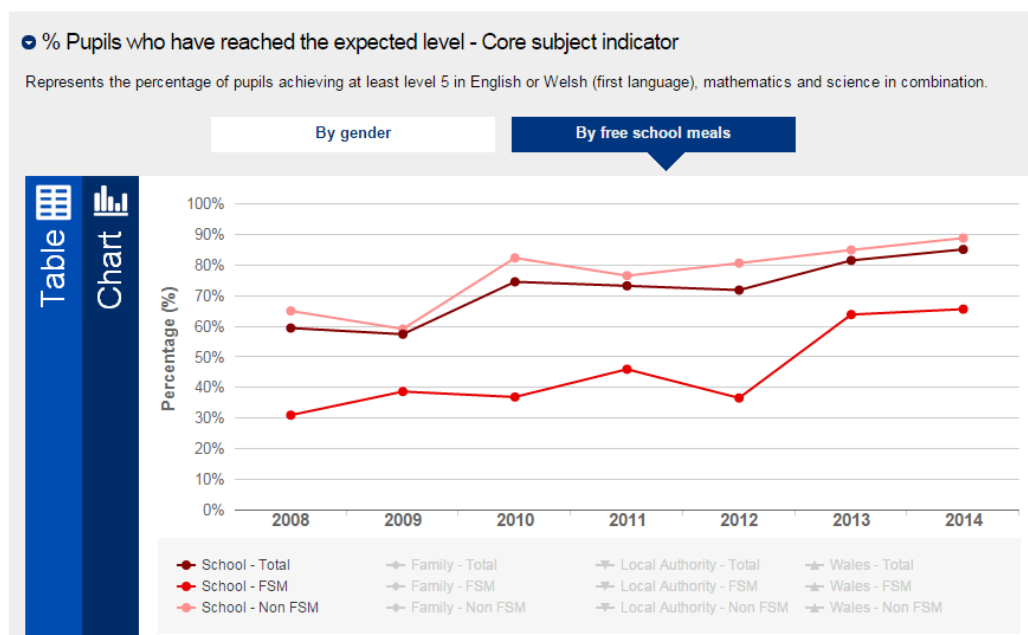
The school also works to improve the students' wellbeing by having two counsellors. A host of local agencies, such as CAHMS, the fire service, Young Carers, the Inclusion service, Barnardos and Women's Aid are also worked with, in order to best support pupils and their families.

As well as working with pupils and parents, the school ensures that staff feel confident that they can stretch pupils, in order to raise attainment. Teachers work in triads and provide co-coaching using the Iris technology, which films lessons and allows teachers to easily look back at the video, in order to assess where they could improve.

The school is also part of the leading and emerging schools practitioners project. Bryntirion, the 'emerging' school has been linked with a 'leading' school in Port Talbot. This has allowed staff members to visit Port Talbot, in order to share learning on closing the gap.

2.6.3 Impact of activities to date

In recent years, the school has seen a closing in the attainment gap between FSM and non FSM pupils, which suggests that the activities and strategy the school has put in place, is working.



2.6.4 Areas for improvement

The school has activities covering all the Estyn recommendations for tackling poverty through education. Therefore it is not surprising that attainment levels of the school have improved. Although one of the barriers the school faces is the dependence of the Pupil Deprivation Grant, in order to deliver these activities. Therefore, longer term strategies may need to take account of the fact that funding could be more limited for these activities in the future.

To note, only senior members of staff were consulted at the school. Therefore, further evidence is needed to assess whether the school's strategy is being widely communicated within the school.

Given the emerging success and dynamism of the school, it will be interesting to see what learning activities they could hold themselves, to assist other schools in closing the gap.

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