

Learners, Schools & Communities: where am I teaching?

	Target	What I have done in this assignment:
Target 1	Write critically rather than descriptively wherever possible.	Revisit advice on Moodle on improving academic writing, also using the marking criteria as guidance.
Target 2	Ensure that you make appropriate connections more explicitly in your work so that the content of the whole essay is focused on answering the research question.	Use literature to support my point rather than 'list' the work of different authors and assume that the reader will make the connections between them themselves. Ensure to relate points back to the title of the assignment.
Target 3	Ensure that you evaluate your work critically, acknowledging its strengths and weaknesses.	Using advice on Moodle and the assignment marking criteria to support my academic writing skills.

Word Count
2691

Component 2

How a school develops one aspect of its SDP: a report that critically reflects on the actions, impact and evidence base.

The Curriculum for Wales 2022 puts emphasis on learners being “well-rounded individuals” (Successful Futures, 2015, p.5), with The Four Purposes at the core of the reform (Donaldson, 2015). Therefore, it is imperative that a school development plan (SDP) reflects achievable and effective strategies that allow learners to succeed within their learning environment. Schools must treat the SDP as a “live document” (Welsh Government, 2014) and continually critically interact with it to establish a progressive learning setting. This essay will explore how a school measures progression, focusing on one aspect of the SDP and exploring how success is identified.

To give context, the focus school is a large comprehensive school and sixth form in Swansea, with a large, diverse community of 1,700 learners aged 11-18. The school holds Welsh pioneer status and has worked alongside the Welsh Government developing and trialling the new Curriculum for Wales 2022 for 5 years. In the most recent Estyn report, the school received “excellent” against all judged learning areas (Estyn, 2018). In order to preserve the school’s right to anonymity, the name of the school has been removed throughout (BERA, 2018).

The priority focus of the school is high attainment for all. On the surface, the school indicates they have efficient strategies in place in order to produce such exceptional Estyn reports. Learner results are favourable compared to national scores and the new curriculum that saw implementation in 2016 allows for the majority of pupils to access the Four Purposes and thrive (Estyn, 2018).

One notable feature identified by the school’s SDP falls within Wellbeing. A fall in attendance has been noted compared to previous years; attendance in 2018 was 0.3% lower than modelled and 0.8% lower than target (SDP, 2018). Whilst the drop is notable, it is not concerning and no Scheduling actions are required (Welsh Government, 2014), however the school has identified it as a target for action (see Appendix – Figure 1).

There is a strong argument suggesting that high attainment cannot occur without high attendance (Welsh Government; 2016; Estyn, 2014; Taylor, 2012; Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, 2003). Research suggests that absentees are at risk of falling behind, failing to gain strong results and are therefore less likely to remain in or enter higher education (Estyn, 2014; Welsh Government 2016).

For a school with high attainment as a priority, it is understandable why high attendance is a focus of the SDP. Unfortunately, attendance is not an easy measure to control and schools face challenges in lowering their absenteeism.

The catchment area of the school is quite large, which attracts diverse learners from a variety of backgrounds. Each type of learner brings a different need that the school must cater to in order to best support them. To make matters more challenging, the school must also deal with a variety of absences excuses, such as illness and the undefined unauthorised absence (Estyn, 2014).

The Department for Education (2018) reports that girls eligible for free school meals (FSM) account for the highest rate of both illness related and unauthorised absences (Department for Education, 2018), whilst Estyn (2014) notes that the majority of unauthorised absences are special educational needs (SEN) and behavioural, emotional and social difficulty (BESD) learners. These challenged learners reflect absences 3.5 times higher than the average learner (Estyn, 2014).

It becomes apparent that the most vulnerable, disadvantaged and challenged learners within our society appear to be accounting for the highest levels of school absences. This could be due to many different reasons; parents who do not see the benefit of education (Taylor, 2012) or learners that struggle to access high standards set by schools and so avoid education completely (Estyn, 2014). It is no wonder then why schools lay such importance on collating absence figures in real time, so that they can identify and best support their learners immediately (Smith & Reimer, 2005).

6% of the focus school learners are eligible for FSM whilst less than 10% live in the 20% most deprived areas of Wales (Estyn, 2018). Whilst these figures seem low compared to national average statistics, 6% actually equates to 102 learners. These learners must be supported in order to reduce their chances of becoming absent and not in education, employment or training (NEET) (Taylor, 2012).

The school has utilised a strategic model (Welsh Government, 2014) in order to introduce and refine their approaches. This cyclical process allows for continual reflection of their methods in order to improve outcomes (see Appendix – Figure 3).

The school's priority vision is identified as promoting increased attendance. The senior leadership team (SLT) then evaluates and identifies potential strategies before addressing the stakeholders (Welsh Government, 2018).

In recent years, the school implemented a School Advisory Board (See Appendix – Figure 4) that comprises of all stakeholders in order to achieve strategic planning. During this process, they are consulted to ensures all parties are committed to adhering to the

agendas proposed (Welsh Government, 2014) whilst using feedback they to redefine and prioritise targets. The SAB continue to meet termly to discuss processes, refine implementation and examine results.

The school has a dedicated approach to making and improving action; clear and high expectations are set for both staff and learners in order to achieve targets.

The school has a transparent expectation for high learner attendance. Form tutors have access to class charts that monitor daily attendance, showing an actual versus a target figure. Data from SIMS is utilised to produce daily updates so form tutors can track attendance. The register is recorded in every lesson, and an after-school register identifies those attending extra-curricular events but not lessons. This allows for early identification of absences, which is integral to ensuring learners do not fall behind (Smith & Reimer, 2005).

Learners are educated on why attendance is important. This allows learners to satisfy the Ethical, Informed Citizen criteria; learners can “understand and consider the impact of their actions” (Donaldson, 2015). The school has embedded attendance into their culture, regularly report attendance levels in weekly assembly meetings, reinforcing its importance amongst the community. This approach is supported by Taylor (2012), who identified that schools that have an emphasis on high attendance within their ethos successfully maintain high attendance.

The school works with a local charity that provides free sanitary products for distribution around the school. The Department of Education recently acknowledged “period poverty”; a phrase that emerged from media reports that economically disadvantaged girls had poor attendance during their period as they couldn’t afford sanitary products (Department of Education, 2018). Whilst there is no evidence to suggest this is an issue within the focus school, they have taken measures to ensure it does not hinder their learners, regardless of their economic background.

The school employs an on-site nurse to support learner welfare and wellbeing. This tactical approach also encourages parents who are overly cautious with sickness to send their children to school in order to receive a professional diagnosis. This reflects a similar point made by Taylor (2012) who suggested anxious parents account for school absences. “Illness” is the highest excuse for absence in education (Department for Education, 2018) and this approach imitates that of other schools who have benefited from appointing a Health Adviser (Estyn, 2018), reducing unnecessary absence whilst upholding the school’s duty to learner wellbeing (Estyn, 2018).

The school has an efficient response time to informing parents of unauthorised absences. Dedicated administrative teams checks SIMS registers and contact parents within the morning to inform them of their child’s absence if it has not previously been explained.

This approach dissuades truancy and encourages valuable parental involvement with the learner's school career (Smith & Reimer, 2005); parental engagement is so beneficial it equates to adding 2-3 years to a learner's school experience (Hattie, 2012).

With continued truancy or unauthorised absences, the school is quick respond, organising meetings with parents or involving external agencies that lead to fines and court summons. The school contact the learner's home several times to remind them of their legal duty to ensure their child attends school (Swansea Council, 2016). Holding families accountable and the threat of financial loss is often enough to encourage complacent parents to comply (Taylor, 2012).

Suspensions are a rarity within the school. An on-site specialised exclusion unit for learners with challenging behaviour has been set-up in order to keep them in education, encouraging continued academic success, even if they need to be removed from the mainstream setting. This approach has been effective, with many schools having trialled this approach, and results indicate BESD learners are less likely to becoming NEET in these circumstances (Newcastle City Council, 2017).

The school puts an emphasis on schemes such as Pupil Voice and School Communication Teams, where learners provide feedback and suggestions to better managing the learning experience. Time is dedicated during registration to allow learners to debate and express opinions, giving them insight into school operations and having their thoughts heard. This further allows learners to gain knowledge of their schooling community and meet the standards of the Four Purposes (Donaldson, 2015; Estyn, 2018).

Throughout the school high attendance is celebrated and form groups are rewarded with termly pizza parties and treats if attendance exceeds target. This positive reinforcement encourages learners to maintain high attendance, using similar techniques established by Pavlov's theory of operant conditioning (Deidrich, 2010).

The challenge doesn't necessarily come with implementing these procedures. The challenge arrives when monitoring their impact and evaluating these methods for success is necessary.

Generally, implementations that arise from SDPs will not lead to instant results; they are investments into the future of learning at the school and take time to refine before results are measurable. Even then, results can be subjective, so schools need to have a clear idea of what success looks like in order to evidence improvements (Welsh Government, 2016). For example, wellbeing is much harder to measure than attendance.

For the school, this involves regular reviews. Form tutors attend fortnightly meetings to identify issues they are facing within their classes, whilst senior leadership teams and the

on-site research team analyse the figures. The SDP is also annually reviewed by Estyn who must confirm they are progressing enough towards the targets that they have set. It is this continual review and assess style approach that allows the school to strive for improved learner outcomes.

It's clear the school is able to advantageously utilise the school planning development cycle (see Appendix – Figure 3); the school effectively implement strategies based on feedback from stakeholders and utilises the research team and SLT effectively in order to evaluate results. This reflective model (Welsh Government, 2014) allows the school to continually assess and improve their performance. There are however difficulties that a school faces in promoting attendance.

Learners do not always have a support network at home that encourages attendance or promotes the benefits of education (Taylor, 2012) and so these learners often have no motivation to attend school. These parents and guardians are in breach of their legal duty to ensure their child attends school and are at risk of penalties (Welsh Statutory Instrument, 2011). Currently only 50-60% of fines issued are paid and court summons prove costly and time-consuming. The system is also easily exploited, with parents simply not showing up to summons. As the average fine imposed is only £165, it is hard to see how this system is effective or punitive enough (Taylor, 2012) and so revisions are suggested. Increasing the risk of higher fines for parents or even community service sentences could encourage higher results in attendance.

An area that could benefit from further reflection is how the school can better support absences from black, Asian, minority ethnic (BAME) and English as an additional language (EAL) learners. During my time spent at the school, I was able to note that there were significant EAL learners with extensive absences. These were mostly unauthorised with learners taking several weeks off to visit family abroad during term time.

Nearly a quarter of the school's learners are from a BAME background, whilst a fifth identify as EAL (Estyn, 2018). Whilst this diversity should be celebrated, the school is required to identify a variety of further strategies in order to best support all learners' wellbeing and access to education.

Research shows that in recent years, unauthorised holidays involving abroad travel raised amongst learners (Estyn, 2014) which identifies a need for schools to be more concerned with multiculturalism. Learners could be celebrating religious events or travelling abroad to visit family they rarely see and cannot afford to travel to outside of term time. These events generally require a longer absence than standard unauthorised absences or sickness. This is something I felt the school struggled to monitor or control. Often learners returned and were thrown back into the curriculum having missed several weeks of work and were visually overwhelmed at the prospect of catching up.

Welsh schools with similarly diverse communities have implemented strategies in order to deal with absences relating to multiculturalism; coinciding teacher training days with large religious or cultural community events mean learners that would ordinarily be absent do not miss out. Appointing community representatives to bridge gaps between minority communities and the school can encourage better communication; these community representatives can become stakeholders invested in their learner's education and are able to join SABs to ensure their community's voice is heard. Strong encouragement for BAME learners to get involved with Pupil Voice and extra-curricular events can improve their confidence and encourage stronger attendance (Estyn, 2014). EAL learners benefit hugely from higher attendance rates; their literacy and oracy skills develop as they are exposed to English, which in turn allows their attainment to improve (Moody, unknown).

Further investment into digital lessons can also encourage absentees to remain engaged with learning. This point seems more relevant now than ever, given the challenges schools are facing in providing distance learning throughout Covid-19. The majority of teachers at the focus school utilise Google Classroom currently, which can prove to be an effective tool in order to communicate lesson content to absent learners (Mashhadi & Kargozari, 2010). Schools could encourage all teachers to utilise a digital platform in order to distribute homework or resources outside of face-to-face lessons to reinforce learning when learners cannot be present within the classroom.

Finally, the quality of an SDP varies from school to school. The concept of an SDP is fairly new to the education system having only recently been introduced in 2015. (Welsh Government, 2014). Evaluations have shown that when effective development planning is part of the school culture, it positively influences staff motivation, the quality of learning and teaching and the standards which the learners achieve (Welsh Government, 2014; Welsh Government 2016). There are schools that struggle to meet the regulations of the SDP which results in poorly planned SDPs that are either too challenging to implement or not aspirational enough. Further self-evaluation processes would be beneficial to schools underachieving in the development of their SDPs. Being more evaluative of performance and stronger analysis of data could prove beneficial (Welsh Government, 2014), alongside better consultation with stakeholders in order to strengthen active partnerships in the school development planning process (The Education and Training Inspectorate, 2008).

The school has taken some effective and innovative approaches to their delivery of the curriculum that complement their SDP targets. Pupils thrive in "inclusive environment" (Estyn, 2018, p.5) and the staff are effectively able to promote positive and trusting relationships that lead to high levels of wellbeing (Estyn, 2018).

The reality is that Swansea reflects some of the lowest attendance rates in Wales (StatsWales, 2019) yet the focus school is able to maintain impressively high attendance figures, even if it does remain a target for them from an attainment perspective. The most

recent Estyn report did not even mention their attendance, and their 94.5% attendance (2018) is far higher than the local authority minimum target and compares favourably to schools within the same community (Estyn, 2015).

Understanding the SDP and the involvement required by all stakeholders has proved inciteful. It is important to identify opportunities that can allow learners to engage with and thrive within their community, such as Pupil Voice, School Advisory Boards. Continual assessment of strategies ensures there are inclusive opportunities for all and promoting attendance strengthens engagement with learning.

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Appendix

Figure 1: Identifies the school's priority of Wellbeing, in which attendance is outlined as a target (2018-2021)

Priority: Wellbeing
Evaluation: • Develop a robust, evidence based model to evaluate 'wellbeing' (measure and define beyond A and E) - under development • Reinforce protocols and procedures to support pupil attendance - review and evaluate current model (95.3%+) - attendance for the year is 94.5%, 0.3% short of modelled and 0.8% short of school target. Importantly we are in line with the family and above LA. • Refine Newid provision so that it continues to support all learners, including those with complex needs, and enables them to effect positive change - provision in this area of the school continues to evolve and strengthen; the PGW team is managed by a Senior PGW who reports directly to the Assistant Headteacher (Wellbeing) and Deputy Headteacher (Safeguarding); each year group (7-11) has a designated PGW who follows the cohort through the school and they work alongside their respective Learning Leader; Learning Leaders are also supported by Assistant Learning Leaders; in the Sixth Form the PGW works as part of the Sixth Form Team (Key Stage Manager, Learning Leaders X2, Assistant Learning Leaders X2, Assistant Headteacher); this team is also supported by the ALN team, the Pupil Welfare Officer and the Educational Welfare Officer. PGWs are a key point of contact for parents and external agencies who support our learners. This level of provision marks a step change in the level of wrap around care we provide to learners, particularly those with complex needs, but represents excellent value in terms of pupil wellbeing and outcomes. • Review new Behaviour and Ethos policy and procedure - in September 2018 we introduced a new policy and accompanying procedures which marked a significant cultural shift in terms of community wide attitudes and engagement. Adopting the 'five pillars' of Pivotal practice presented some challenges to pupils and, in particular, staff. However, a focus on effective yard/corridor/classroom management has paid dividends, particularly when the principle of calm, consistent adult behaviour is applied. When necessary, restorative follow up in the form of 'call backs', has shifted the focus from punitive punishment to actually addressing the issue of the behaviour itself. Very good progress has been made on this community wide priority.

Figure 2: Identifies the SDP's priority areas (2018-2021)

Development Priority Areas	2018-2021
Standards	• Maintain the school's relative position in relation to key performance indicators including Capped 9; Literacy APS; Numeracy APS; Science APS; A*-A) • Continue to focus on maintaining positive progress (value-added) for all groups of learners including FSM, EAL and ALN
Wellbeing and attitudes to learning	• Develop a robust, evidence based model to evaluate wellbeing (measure and define beyond A and E) • Reinforce protocols and procedures to support pupil attendance (95%+) • Continue to refine Newid provision so that it continues to support all learners, including those with complex needs, and enables them to effect positive change • Review and evaluate the impact and efficacy of Behaviour and Ethos policy and procedure
Teaching and learning experiences	• Evaluate the iLearn curriculum; ensure that we have a curriculum which delivers Donaldson's 'four purposes' and is suitable for all learners • Develop an assessment model (+ Pioneer Schools) which supports the delivery of the new curriculum (including the 'four purposes') • Embed and extend the DCF • Extend the use of Welsh in activities across the school community and aim to achieve the Bronze Starter Iaith Award • Identify how the collaborative learning culture in Olchfa has improved learning experiences for pupils; continue to develop a professional learning model which recognises the importance of research based practice; accelerate our partnership work with other schools and education providers
Care, support and guidance	• Tracking, monitoring and the provision of learning support - develop bespoke tracking system for iLearn (Progression steps and 4Ps); develop bespoke wellbeing tracking system (not exclusively attendance and behaviour) • Further develop parental engagement systems and programmes • Personal development - ensure iLearn supports holistic education at learning area level; continue to develop pse provision which compliments and builds on learning area provision • Safeguarding - continue to refine a system which ensures that all children are safe; develop the 'culture of safety' across the school and wider community
Leadership and management	• Further develop a professional learning model which enables teachers to demonstrate sustained highly-effective practice • Restructure leadership and TLR model to reflect and support the current developmental school priorities • Review and evaluate the improving quality programme to establish the extent to which it supports the core work of the school as a learning community

Figure 3: A diagram representing how a school should treat targets identified by the SDP
 Taken from Welsh Government (2014) School Development Plans: Guidance.

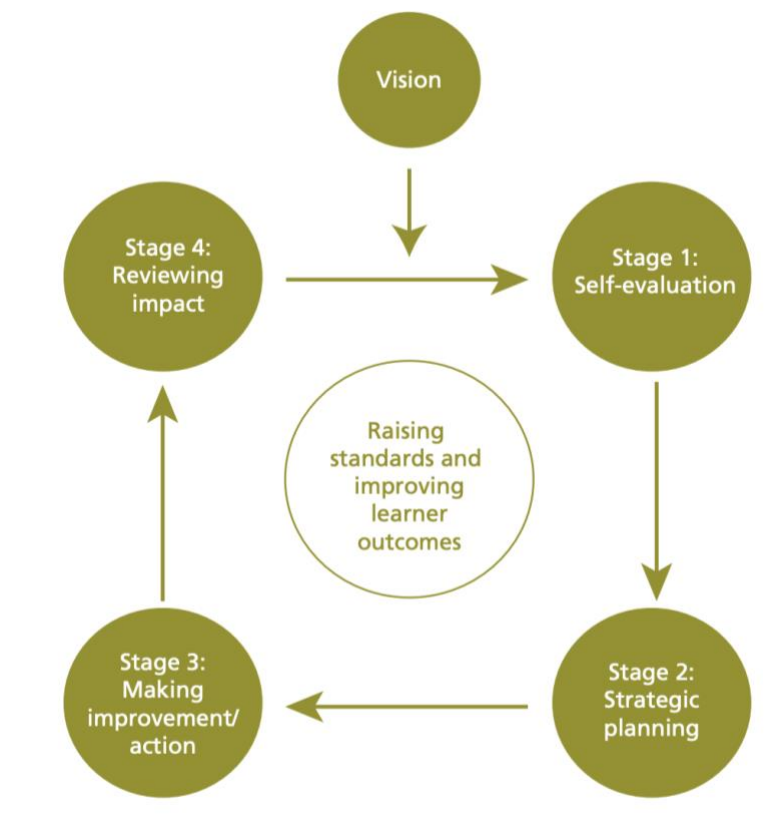


Figure 4: The structure of the School Advisory Board (SAB) depicting how all stakeholders interact

