Strategies for schools to improve attendance and manage lateness

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Introduction

1. When a child attends school on a regular basis, they take an important step towards reaching their full potential, and are given the greatest opportunity to learn new things and develop their skills. Children who miss school frequently can fall behind with their work and do less well in exams.

2. The more time a child spends around other children, whether in the classroom or as part of a school team or club, the more chance they have of making friends and feeling included, boosting social skills, confidence and self esteem.

3. While the parent is primarily responsible for ensuring their child attends school regularly, where school attendance problems occur the key to successfully resolving these problems is engaging the child through collaborative working between the parent, the school and the local authority.

4. This document sets out some examples of strategies that can be employed by schools to help improve school attendance. Additional information and further guidance can be found on the Inclusion and Pupil Support pages of the Welsh Assembly Government's website. These web pages include exemplar documents, leaflets, flyers and templates to support good attendance which can be adopted or adapted to suite local circumstances.

    http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/policy_strategy_and_planning/schools/339214-wag/?lang=en

Strategies to improve attendance and manage lateness

5. Evidence has shown that tackling absence can be most effective when a number of different approaches are adopted. The initiatives used by schools to encourage attendance are partly dictated by a number of factors including the age of pupils, parental interest, geographical location and social and economic circumstances. Individual schools need to respond to their own particular problems in their own way. The following approaches may help in the development of a robust attendance strategy.

Have an attendance policy in place

6. A school's attendance policy should set out its systems and procedures for ensuring regular school attendance and investigating the underlying causes of poor attendance. It is important that it is not just one member of staff who writes the policy. The policy will be more meaningful if developed in consultation with teachers, pupils, families, the Education Welfare Service, administrative and ancillary staff, governors and senior management.

7. The key components of an attendance policy should include the following:

8. **The principles underlying the policy and how they apply to the whole school community:**
    - How the policy ties in to the school's approach to promoting emotional well-being.
    - How the policy links with the school's other policies.
    - How these principles relate to the school's overall aims and relate to the rest of the curriculum.

9. **Aims and targets:**
    - Specific but realistic targets for improving and maintaining attendance figures.
    - The resources a school invests in improving attendance.

10. **The rights, roles and responsibilities of governors, staff, pupils and parents:**
    - Details of the school's partnership agreement with the Education Welfare Service.
    - The legal responsibilities of the LA, school and parents should be cited.
    - Emphasis on a partnership approach between senior management, governors, and those working to support attendance with parents and pupils should be outlined.

11. **Procedures:**
    - The stages, processes and staffing involved in registration.
    - The system for lateness.
    - How and when problems with attendance are communicated to parents.
    - Processes used to reintegrate students returning to school after an absence.
    - Referral criteria to support services.

12. **Strategies used by the school in the area of attendance:**
    - How rewards and sanctions are used to encourage regular attendance.
    - The methods and means of achieving the school's strategies, including any training required for staff involved in implementation.

13. **Monitoring and evaluation:**
    - How the school will evaluate the effectiveness of its strategies.
    - When will monitoring and evaluation take place.
    - Who will be involved in monitoring and evaluation and how will they contribute.
    - How evaluations will be fed back into policy.

14. Detailed guidance on designing an effective policy can be found on the Inclusion and Pupil Support pages of the Welsh Assembly Government website.

    http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/policy_strategy_and_planning/schools/339214-wag/?lang=en

Make use of electronic registration

15. Where possible and practicable schools should record registration electronically. Electronic attendance registration software enables more effective and efficient monitoring of attendance on a daily basis as well as allowing the identification of longer-term trends in absence which can be used to inform school policy and practice. Electronic packages that automate the contacting of parents to inform them of their child's absence have also proven effective in reducing absence and locating children and young people. It also enables registration for each lesson, and the identification of lateness and post-registration truancy.

Case study - Electronic registration

A number of secondary schools have systems that allow teachers to record the register each lesson using a handheld electronic device, which then transmits the results by radio waves to a central computer. The computer generates a daily contact list of the parents of pupils absent that day. The school's administrative staff will then telephone the parent and record the response on the computer system. Where telephone calls are not answered, the system generates a letter to the absent child's parents. The system is also useful for quickly identifying "internal truancy" that occurs when pupils register at the beginning of the session but then miss individual lessons. The school uses weekly and monthly reports to identify patterns of absence.

Use the correct and appropriate attendance codes

16. Registration procedures need to be clearly outlined in the school's attendance policy and repeated in the staff handbook. Accurate recording is essential in order to meet legal requirements and promote the safety of all pupils.

17. Different schools will have different procedures for allocating attendance and absence codes. In most schools, this will involve the form or class teacher; however, it is important for all staff to have a general understanding of when each code may be used and its statistical meaning. Staff responsible for entering codes should have a thorough understanding of the issues regarding attendance. Staff should also be aware of when and to whom they should refer instances of absence in accordance with school guidelines. For example, a school might decide that it requires tutors to refer all pupils when absence through sickness exceeds a certain percentage in the year. Clear guidance also needs to be given on what constitutes 'other authorised circumstances' so that a consistent approach is maintained across the school.

18. Full guidance on the use of codes and an explanation of the regulations governing the keeping of pupil registers can be found in the Welsh Assembly guidance circular 'Inclusion and Pupil Support'.

http://new.wales.gov.uk/publications/circular/circulars2006/1552980/?lang=en

Make use of the data available

19. All schools hold a great deal of information about attendance. Schools that have been successful in improving attendance and reducing persistent absence have a clear understanding of the attendance issues within the school; they identify these through the analysis of data. Anecdotal evidence about reasons for absence and patterns of absence can be misleading.

20. Attendance data helps strategic planning and can enable schools to manage attendance issues more effectively. Whole school attendance figures produced monthly, termly or yearly, based on year groups, can indicate factors such as:
    • declining attendance in year groupings; and
    • the effect of seasonal attendance e.g. attendance may decline during colder months and preceding school holidays.

21. Weekly figures may illustrate the:
    • effect of staff absenteeism;
    • fall in attendance preceding teacher training days, half terms, study leave or work experience;
    • effect of ending terms on a Monday or Tuesday;
    • effect of activity days, day trips or residential trips;
    • effect of the timing of the school day; and
    • effect of pupil holidays in term time.

22. Continuous analysis of individual pupil attendance and of the whole school can give scope for strategic planning. By identifying those levels which the school considers are indicators of persistent absenteeism or irregular attendance, it is possible to identify the extent of the problem. The school can then target time provided by the education welfare officer and pastoral staff more effectively by producing:
    • individual attendance records which highlight reasons for absence and the pattern and rate of unauthorised absence; and
    • obtain lists of all pupils with unexplained absence which can be fed back to the responsible member of staff.

23. The pastoral staff will then be able to identify those pupils who give cause for concern. Coded absence, broken down into a class and/or group format, would allow identification of excessive unauthorised absences.

Have a first day contact system in place

24. Schools should emphasise parents' prime responsibility for ensuring attendance by asking parents to inform them as soon as possible if their child will not be attending school on a particular day. If a pupil is absent without explanation, school administrative staff should, wherever possible, contact the parents that same day, including in cases where the pupil skips lessons after registration. A declared and active policy of first day contact makes clear to pupils and parents that absence is a matter of concern and will be followed up.

By contacting the parent the school also ensures that the parent is aware that their child is not in school enabling the parent to take steps, where necessary, to establish that their child is safe. This approach is made easier if the school has electronic registration which can automatically generate contact lists for absent pupils.

Raise the profile of attendance

25. Schools can raise the profile of attendance with parents and the wider community through the use of home-school agreements, parents' evenings, school newsletters, or other communications. Many schools send out letters automatically if attendance falls below a certain level.

26. Posters and leaflets can be used in numerous ways to promote attendance. These can cover every feature of attendance and can be distributed through schools as well as locations such as libraries, leisure centres and other community focussed locations. Some authorities have used websites or promotional advert slots on local radio in order to ensure that the issue remains in the public domain. Others produce information booklets for schools to distribute to parents advising of school attendance regulations, child employment and the role of the Education Welfare Service. These can be paid for by selling advertising space to local companies.

27. When welcoming and inducting new parents and pupils it is important to raise awareness of the importance of punctuality and attendance. As part of staff induction brief new staff on the school's philosophy on attendance and introduce them to their responsibilities for attendance management.

Involve parents

28. Communicate frequently with parents about positive achievements and improvements and in ways which emphasise the responsibility and role of parents in partnership with the school. Ensure parents are welcomed into the school and can gain easy access to staff.

29. It can be helpful to issue regular reminders to parents of school procedures for notifying the school of a pupil's absence. Some schools have installed a dedicated 'attendance' telephone line specifically for parents to inform the school of absences. To overcome attendance problems, it can be useful to have meetings with parents to discuss strategies in school and at home which encourage regular school attendance and the production of an action plan for improving attendance.

Target support

30. The use of targeted intervention and support in areas of specific need can be very effective in improving attendance, particularly when working in partnership with the Education Welfare Service and the local authority.

Case Study - Effective use of an Education Welfare Officer (EWO) in a primary school

In one primary school with very poor attendance, an EWO, funded under the Better Schools Fund is based at the school for two and a half days each week.

This officer had experience of working with families and with schools. Having a base in the school enabled the EWO to become part of the school team and to foster close links with the school community. The EWO was able to offer counselling support, follow up absences on the first day, arrange meetings with parents and pupils, attend core meetings with a number of agencies and reduce the workload for staff in general and the head teacher in particular. The EWO works closely with staff and is available to provide advice and support on a variety of issues including child protection matters when necessary. Because the EWO is not a teacher and has built up a good relationship with parents in the community, some parents feel more confident in talking to him and his role has developed. Since the establishment of the EWO at the school, attendance figures have improved and the number of late arrivals has reduced dramatically.

Case Study - Effective use of an Education Welfare Officer in a secondary school

One large secondary school has two EWOs allocated to it. One of the EWOs is also the EWO for the associate primary schools. This has the advantage of ensuring continuity and sharing related issues between primary and secondary schools and also addressing issues related to siblings. The EWOs are key members of the school pastoral teams that meet weekly to discuss pupil-related issues. There are two teams, one for each key stage. Each team consists of the head and deputy of the key stage, year tutors, SEN staff, English as an additional language staff and EWOs.

An 'Information to Parents' leaflet introducing the school's EWOs has been distributed to all new year 7 pupils. This leaflet gives parents some useful tips on routines and procedures for a successful transition from primary to secondary school. EWOs are present at all events relating to transition from year 6 to year 7.

EWOs attend all pastoral support programme reviews which are held half-termly. This arrangement ensures that EWOs are fully aware of all issues regarding each pupil which assists when liaising with the family. EWOs meet the appropriate year tutor weekly to discuss attendance and any welfare issues that they need to follow up.

EWOs have been present at parents' evenings for all year groups in order to raise parental awareness of the education welfare service and the ways in which it can support them. The evenings have also given EWOs the opportunity to assist with any attendance or welfare issues that parents might be facing. EWOs raise parents' awareness of attendance-related issues by means of letters sent to the home each half-term.

The way in which EWOs work emphasises to pupils and parents that the school considers the role of the EWO to be an important and integral part of the school's provision.

Case Study - School Attendance Panel

A project in one LA involved the establishment of a school attendance panel with powers to call parents to account for their children's poor attendance rates.

The school attendance panel consisted of a member of the school's senior management team, the head of year, the education welfare officer, a minute-taker, the pupil and the pupil's parents.

Prior to calling the school attendance panel meeting, the school and the education welfare officer submit evidence to show that they have tried to improve the pupil's attendance.

One secondary school working with the education welfare service identified nine families to be involved in this project. These were families whose children's attendance had not shown improvement despite the efforts of the school. The pupils' attendance rates ranged between 0% and 56%.

The school invites the parent / guardian to a panel meeting. At the meeting, the education welfare officer issues the parent with a formal warning and advises that the LA will instigate legal proceedings if attendance does not improve.

The pupil and parents have the opportunity to explain the reasons for the poor attendance and explore any ways in which the panel can provide support. The panel then produces an action plan. If the parents refuse or fail to attend the meeting, the panel holds the meeting in their absence. The school makes it clear that attendance must improve in line with the targets in the action plan or legal proceedings will commence.

The EWO checks the pupil's attendance after two weeks. If attendance does not meet the set targets, the EWO begins legal action. If attendance is satisfactory, the EWO sends a letter to the home and continues to monitor the pupil's attendance.

If attendance subsequently falls off, the EWO will investigate and may begin legal action if necessary.

The attendance of seven pupils improved. The parents of the other two pupils were prosecuted.

Use rewards and incentives to encourage attendance and punctuality

31. Research has shown that rewards are far more effective than punishment in motivating pupils. As well as encouraging and rewarding attendance, these schemes can also increase the profile of attendance, both within the school and in the wider community.

32. Letters to parents and carers and special privileges are amongst many particularly effective ways of demonstrating praise for good or improved attendance. A more formal reward system of credits, merits and prizes can be used to recognise and congratulate pupils, some examples of which are detailed here:

Case Study: Attendance & punctuality rewards and incentives

A primary school runs an Early Bird scheme where pupils from Key Stages 1 and 2 are encouraged to attend fully and punctually for a week, receiving a sticker for each attendance. Letters go out to parents prior to the scheme requesting their support. After the week, all pupils with full attendance receive a certificate and can be entered into a prize draw at county level. The scheme can be incorporated into the Curriculum - children can take part in creative writing exercises and design posters etc around the subject of punctuality.

Case Study: Attendance rewards and incentives

The 100% Attendance Club offers rewards and incentives to those pupils achieving 100 per cent attendance across a whole term. Annual events can be used to celebrate attendance across the whole school year and for consecutive academic years.

Case Study: Attendance rewards and incentives

As part of the Attendance Tree project, pupils are given a gold leaf for 100 per cent attendance, silver for over 98 per cent, and bronze for over 95 per cent. At the end of each term, the pupils add their leaves, with their names on, to the tree, and are presented with a certificate in School Assembly. At the end of the year, those with over 95 per cent attendance over the whole year are entered into a prize draw.

Case Study: Attendance rewards and incentives

A secondary school runs a weekly lottery for a five pounds cash prize. At School Assembly, a tutor group is drawn at random from a bag, and then a pupil number is drawn from another bag. If that pupil has a 100 per cent attendance record for the fortnight, they win the prize money, but if not the prize rolls over to the next week. Pupils enjoy the event and it helps to increase their motivation to come to school.

Positively reintegrate absentees

33. When a pupil has been late or absent it is important to positively welcome them into the class on their return. By offering extended support and ensuring absent pupils have work adapted to help them catch up will help minimise problems on their return to school.

Make use of attendance checks

34. The use of both scheduled and unscheduled checks can be used to monitor lateness. "Late gates" is one initiative that has been used in both primary and secondary schools. This involves both school staff and Education Welfare Officers standing at the school gate and taking the names of late arrivals. Letters are then sent home informing parents that their child has been stopped for being late. All parents are informed beforehand that the "Late gate" will be happening but are not given a specific date.

Incorporate attendance into transition planning

35. The transition between primary and secondary school represents a major change for most pupils and research shows that many can experience a slowing down of their progress. It is important for both primary and secondary school attendance policies to identify year six and seven pupils in particular need of support. Secondary schools and their feeder primary schools need to work together to put in place arrangements to make the transition as smooth as possible.

Case Study: Transition

A number of primary schools work with their Education Welfare Service to identify year 6 pupils who may need additional support with attendance at transition to secondary school. The EWO will make a home visit during the summer holidays prior to them starting at their new school. Such visits have been of benefit by putting the child at ease with any problems or concerns they have had.

One Education Welfare Service engages with parents at Transition Open Evenings. They have created a year 6 transition goody bag which contains details of their service, introduces the Education Welfare Officers working with the school, attendance leaflets and goodies. These have proved both popular and successful with parents who have found the information provided in the bags helpful. This in turn brings about increased co-operation and support from parents allowing issues which might lead to poor attendance to be addressed at an earlier stage.