Good practice in re-engaging disaffected and reluctant students in secondary schools

This report draws on a survey of 29 secondary schools, including one academy and one pupil referral unit, to identify sustained good practice in re-engaging disaffected students in their learning. The report illustrates the good practice in the schools visited and what might be achieved by others when reviewing support for disaffected students. The report emphasises the importance of also engaging parents and carers in supporting young people.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects registered childcare and children's social care, including adoption and fostering agencies, residential schools, family centres and homes for children. It also inspects all state maintained schools, non-association independent schools, pupil referral units, further education, initial teacher education, and publicly funded adult skills and employment-based training, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), and the overall level of services for children in local authority areas (through annual performance assessments and joint area reviews).

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Executive summary

Between September 2007 and February 2008, Ofsted undertook a survey of 29 secondary schools, including one academy and one pupil referral unit, selected because they had shown a decrease in unauthorised absences between 2004 and 2006 and had a record of sustained good practice in re-engaging disaffected students in their learning. The aim of the survey was to identify which of the actions the schools had taken had been most successful in helping these students to begin to enjoy learning again.

The survey defined disaffected students as those who displayed one or more of the following characteristics. They were regularly non-compliant, but not aggressive or threatening, and caused repeated low-level disruptions. They were regularly disruptive, challenging or both, which led to repeated entries in the school's incident log, recurring fixed-term exclusions or both. They were absent for 20% or more of the available school sessions in the year. They were quiet and withdrawn and uninterested in most lessons.

The schools in the survey had 32,987 students in all, of whom 4,347 had become disaffected at one time or another. The schools had managed to re-engage 3,404 (78%) of these students successfully. Of the disaffected students in the schools surveyed, the girls had a far higher absence rate than the boys.

The factors which were most successful in helping these students to enjoy learning included:

- a commitment from all staff to meeting the students' needs
- effective monitoring systems to identify students at risk
- close collaboration between primary and secondary schools to prevent students' disengagement at transition
- the involvement of a wide variety of adults within the school and the community to support the students
- regular and effective communication with parents and carers, including involving them closely in determining the strategies to be used to support their children
- modifying the curriculum and drawing on educational providers beyond the school
- close working relationships with local agencies responsible for supporting children and young people.

The schools visited perceived three common factors that worked against the re-engagement of disaffected students: unwillingness on the part of parents to work with the school and, in some cases, collusion with the students against the school; external influences and attractions that were more compelling for the students than

school, such as gangs, criminal activity and drug-taking; and weaknesses in the provision made by the schools and other services for their students.

The report illustrates the good practice seen in the sample of schools visited and what can be achieved. The key findings have implications for the Department for Children, Schools and Families and secondary schools when reviewing support for disaffected students.

Key findings

These features were common in the secondary schools that were successful in helping disaffected students to begin to enjoy learning again.

- The staff shared a commitment to helping the students succeed, which they expressed clearly to students and their families. The school ethos valued and respected the needs of individuals. The students felt part of the school.

- Robust monitoring of academic, personal and social progress, and close collaboration with primary schools and other services for children and young people ensured that students who were likely to become disaffected were identified early. They received appropriate support before and after they entered secondary school.

- Teaching assistants provided vital support for individuals, helping them to maintain their interest and cope successfully with any crises. This allowed teachers to focus on teaching the whole class.

- Pastoral support was managed by assigned support staff. They acted as the first point of contact for all parents and carers and they directed them to the most appropriate member of staff if they could not deal with the issue themselves.

- Communication with students and their families was very effective. It ensured that they were fully involved in the process and had confidence in the decisions that were made. Students knew they were listened to and felt they could contribute to decisions about their future. Home–school liaison staff played a critical role.

- Specific support, such as temporary withdrawal from classes and training in life skills to help students change their attitudes and improve their learning, was very effective.

- At Key Stage 4, a high-quality, flexible curriculum, involving a range of accredited training providers outside the school, was effective in engaging students more in their learning.

Some of the schools surveyed felt that significant delays from specialist services, such as child and adolescent mental health services, had contributed to students' continuing disengagement.

Of the disaffected students in the schools surveyed, the girls had a far higher absence rate than the boys (41% compared with 22%). Their absence from school and the reasons for it have been largely overlooked in research literature.

Recommendations

The Department for Children, Schools and Families should:

- undertake research into the extent to which girls fall out of the education system and the reasons for this
- liaise with the Department of Health to ascertain the availability, promptness of service response and quality of child and adolescent mental health services for young people.

Secondary schools should:

- monitor academic, personal and social progress consistently and regularly so that students at risk of disengagement are identified early
- work with primary schools to identify students at risk of disengagement and develop intervention strategies to support them
- establish flexible systems to communicate with disaffected students, their parents and carers, and the agencies supporting them
- work closely with the parents and carers of disaffected students and make them aware of students' successes as well as the areas where they need to improve
- use the full range of internal and external resources from the local authority and its partners.

The characteristics of the successful schools

Ethos

1. The schools in this survey had been very successful in re-engaging disaffected students. At the time of the survey, they had 32,987 students. Of these, 4,347 (13%) had become disaffected with their learning at one time or another. The schools had succeeded in re-engaging 3,404 (78%) of these.

2. Those at risk of disengagement from learning had a greater chance of success in schools where the headteacher and senior staff gave a clear message that the school was responsible for meeting the needs of all students. They provided good role models in dealing with difficult and disaffected students. They showed that they valued these students and wanted them to stay in school. The involvement of senior staff with the more difficult students helped to convey to them and their families that the school was committed to them.

> 'The assistant headteacher really made him feel special. She said at her first meeting with us: "*You* are the most important person in this room," and he still remembers that.' (Parent)

3. The schools were consistent in dealing with the students, in communicating with their families, and in using rewards and sanctions. This promoted positive relationships and made it easier to manage the students' behaviour. Policies and procedures were used most consistently when staff had been closely involved in developing them. This made teachers feel that senior staff valued their opinions and supported them. As a result, they were prepared to go the extra mile to help individual students; they, in turn, appreciated the extra support. Students and their families recognised this and related positively to staff who supported them.

> 'This is a really good school. There's lots to do. The teaching is good. People really listen to you and no one wants to leave school.' (One of the school's most challenging students)

4. Staff understood the dangers of labelling students and were prepared to give them a fresh start wherever possible. This had a positive impact on students' attitudes and those of their parents and carers.

> 'He is tagged for burglary but this is not a barrier or an issue for the school. All his life he's never had praise but been told he's a non-achiever. Now he has people who show him they care. His attendance has improved and he's starting to achieve.' (Foster carer)

5. The staff were sufficiently self-confident to examine their own practice and to make adaptations to meet students' needs. They understood the importance of compromise, but still maintained high expectations and standards. They required a certain degree of conformity but were flexible about issues such as changes to the timetable, and they allowed students to take time out of the classroom where necessary.

> 'This school works so successfully because it is so flexible and open in trying out new ways to engage individuals.' (Educational psychologist)

> 'The school was very patient when her behaviour was off the wall. She is enjoying school more now that what she does matches what she wants. Compromises were needed and we and the school needed to work together.' (Parent)

6. Although the schools recognised that a student's disengagement had the potential to influence others, they focused on the causes of disaffection rather than its effects. As a result, they were better able to meet the needs of individuals.

> 'Pupils are re-engaged successfully because we get to the root causes of their problems through a coordinated multi-agency approach.' (Headteacher)

Monitoring

7. The schools used quantitative and qualitative data to keep track of students. They were extremely watchful of students' academic progress and personal and social development. Interventions were well timed and very often successful. Where appropriate, the common assessment framework was used to identify students' additional needs.[1]

8. The schools gathered data on academic performance and attendance rigorously and regularly. These were analysed and discussed with staff and contributed to the schools' effective and speedy responses. One deputy headteacher said: 'The data produced for staff does not allow them to hide'.

9. The schools visited also gathered data through the views of students, parents and carers to identify what they did and did not value. Four of the schools used student-attitude questionnaires as diagnostic tools to determine the most appropriate forms of intervention.

10. All the schools used a wide variety of indicators to demonstrate the effectiveness of their strategies to re-engage students. These included:

■ improvements in students' attitudes, attendance and achievement

■ reductions in referrals, detentions and exclusions

■ improvements in the speed with which students settled into school routines

■ students' increased engagement in lessons and a rise in the number of students receiving awards for their performance

■ improved motivation of students at Key Stage 4 as a result of participating in courses delivered off site

■ increases in the number of students progressing to higher levels of education after the age of 16 and increases in the number of school leavers in education, employment or training

■ increases in the number of students contributing positively to the school

■ increased attendance by parents and carers at out-of-school activities

■ positive responses from students, parents and carers to questionnaires, attitude surveys and interviews, and positive informal feedback from parents

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[1] The common assessment framework is a standardised approach to assessing a child's additional needs and deciding how those needs should be met. Further details can be found at: www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/deliveringservices/caf.

- positive feedback from teachers and other professionals
- reductions in the number of complaints from the community.

Early identification and prevention

11. A third of the schools visited worked particularly closely with the primary schools from which their students were drawn to identify those in need or at risk of disengagement, and to give them a fresh start as they moved into Year 7. One of the schools, for example, provided its future students with information and communication technology lessons during their last year in primary school. The learning mentor and parent-support adviser worked with the students and their families before and after transfer to get to know them and gain their confidence. This ensured that the teachers in the secondary school were quickly able to match their approaches to the students' needs and help them to settle well. This school now includes a student-attitude questionnaire in its induction programme, to be undertaken by the students when they are in Year 6, to further the early identification of needs.

12. Matching students to staff with the skills to meet their particular needs was an important contributor to success. In one case, a handful of pupils transferring from Year 6 showed aggressive behaviour. The school carefully identified teaching assistants and form tutors who made contact with the pupils before transfer and remained with them through Year 7 and beyond. These key staff established good relationships with the students and provided continuity. They were able to mediate in any incidents and to influence the attitudes and actions of their colleagues. Another school provided opportunities for challenging Year 6 pupils to spend time in its learning support centre before they moved so that they knew what support would be available in their new school.

> 'I now feel all right, have made lots of friends and I like my form. My tutor said: "Good luck, I hope you do well today." He knew about this discussion with the inspector. They know about you and care.'
> (Year 7 student)

Support staff

13. A key strength of the schools in the survey was their recruitment and deployment of support staff. They chose staff from a wide range of backgrounds. They looked for key attributes such as patience, willingness not to pre-judge children, firmness, consistent approaches, high thresholds of tolerance and willingness to give students a second chance. They found that support staff recruited from the local community were particularly effective in breaking down the barriers between home and school. Because students and their families did not view these staff as part of the local authority's social services provision, or as teachers, they said they found them less intimidating. One such member of staff said, 'Teachers in mainstream schools are successes of the education system but this isn't necessarily valued by disengaged

students. They align themselves more with staff who have other life skills and experiences.'

14. The schools allocated specific pastoral staff to support students. The role of these adults was to establish a personal link and act as a friend, advocate, supervisor, critic and motivator. They built up a very good knowledge of the students and their parents and carers, and worked closely with them and with family support teams. The students held these adults in the same high regard as the teaching staff and said that they were vital in helping them to enjoy learning.

> 'Our key workers are there for us. If you have a problem, you can talk with them.' (Year 10 student)

15. Some of the schools explicitly clarified the role of the support staff, as in this example:

> The term 'support specialist' is deliberate and significant, implying importance and status. The team embraces a wide range of inclusion tasks, as their job titles show. One key element is maintaining discipline, especially in reducing confrontation with class teachers. Behaviour support personnel respond to teachers' requests for support, remove the student from class and deal with the whole situation, including sanctions and home contacts and, if necessary, discuss with the teacher how the situation could have been better handled.

16. Support staff also allowed teachers to concentrate on teaching and to be involved less in managing particularly difficult behaviour. This helped to ensure that students who were being re-integrated into the school or classroom were given a fresh start. One parent summed up the views of many when she said:

> 'The school is doing a fantastic job. They try to understand him and give him credit, unlike his previous school where it was just discipline. If things go wrong, they take him aside and sort out everything around the problem, so they come to a conclusion together. He knows he has to catch up. I know I couldn't have made a better choice.'

Communication

17. The schools visited had good systems for internal communication. These ensured that all the relevant staff received essential information about disaffected students, including details of any planned interventions. This fostered a continuity of approach and helped to convince students and their families that the staff cared about them and wanted to meet their needs. In one school, the team of teaching assistants met every morning to receive updated information on students. They were able to use this to plan their work and to ensure appropriate support for those who needed it most. One of the

schools used its internal email system very effectively, not only to disseminate information but also to enable staff to seek advice from their colleagues in preparing suitable work for particular students.

18. While not shying away from giving difficult messages, the most successful schools purposely conveyed positive information to parents and carers to help them see that their child was valued. In one school, staff emailed positive feedback on students to pastoral managers, who communicated it to parents and carers through texts and postcards.

> 'Even though the school is massive, they have such good communication. If I phone them, the message is sensitively emailed round staff and I'm confident the message gets to people.' (Parent)

19. In just over half the schools visited, pastoral support was managed by teaching assistants. They acted as the first point of contact for all parents and carers and they directed them to the most appropriate member of staff if they could not deal with the issue themselves. The parents and carers appreciated speedy contact and telephone calls that were returned promptly. In the best instances, senior managers understood how anxiety could build up and ensured that immediate contact was made with the student's home.

> 'Communication, including through telephone calls, is on first name terms. It's very relaxed and builds trust. The deputy headteacher had to say some very difficult things to me but she did it sympathetically, almost like a friend.' (Parent)

20. Students said consistently that a major contributor to their re-engagement was the way that staff listened to and consulted them wherever possible. They referred to the way that positive communication made them 'feel good' because staff were 'showing an interest' in them.

> 'Teachers had meetings with me and my parents and wanted to help me and they were willing to change things. They also gave me clearance to see a specific person if I had problems.' (Disengaged Year 10 student being re-integrated into school)

> 'Most of all, staff listen and help.' (Year 8 student)

Parental engagement

21. All the schools visited identified a close partnership with parents or carers as fundamental to re-engaging students and keeping them on track.

> 'Working in partnership with parents or carers is the most powerful process that we have in schools for bringing about lasting and effective change.' (Headteacher)

> 'I think that parents, carers and other people outside school can show students at schools more of the rewards that can be gotten if you do well at school. Also, I think that you can give students a taste of the rewards as well. That will keep them keen to gain these rewards in the future.' (Student in care)

22. Staff in schools acknowledged that some parents and carers felt intimidated or embarrassed by visiting the school. To ease these feelings, the schools gave them the telephone number of a designated member of staff, other than the pastoral support manager; other schools arranged a separate entrance for them. The building of trust and a close relationship between the school and the home ensured effective communication, which allowed difficult as well as positive messages to be communicated.

> 'I don't receive any manic phone calls, so I'm not a nervous wreck any more when school calls. They might begin with "Don't panic: it's good news". I get positive phone calls. There are no knee-jerk reactions. With his other school I was on pins all day.' (Parent)

23. As well as pastoral support managers, all the schools had home–school liaison teams providing key adults who could reinforce parental support. The most effective of these focused their work on specific families. They went into homes, social clubs, bars, the post office and any other places where the community met regularly to establish positive relationships with parents and carers and help them to support their children better. This led to clear improvements, particularly in attendance.

> 'The school gives good support. Staff find out what's wrong and nip problems in the bud.' (Parent)

> 'To support children, you should show that you are interested by helping with homework and showing an interest when it is parents' and carers' evening, and give them plenty of praise.' (Care leaver)

24. All the schools were flexible about the timing of meetings and reviews to make sure that the students could attend them with their parents or carers. One school held regular meetings with small groups of parents and carers of disengaged students, so that they could share their experiences and concerns and see the range of help that was available.

Relationships with other organisations

25. The schools in the survey took the lead in working very closely with relevant agencies, including educational psychologists, social services departments, the education welfare service, the local authority's behaviour team and the staff

from the Connexions service. To ensure that services were integrated for the students, the schools organised regular meetings, held at the school, with representatives from these organisations. They discussed specific cases and, where necessary, made referrals to other specialist agencies. The referrals were generally timely and contributed to improvements in students' learning. Two of the schools, however, reported delays in access to the necessary child and adolescent mental health services. The interventions that schools said they found most helpful were those by Relate counsellors and alcohol and drug counsellors.

> One Year 10 boy's drug misuse caused him to have trouble sleeping, which led to him falling behind with his work. It also strained his relationships with his parents. The family support service helped him by referring him to the drug action team and by giving him the opportunity to talk about his feelings of depression and confusion.

26. The students interviewed said that high-quality presentations from external organisations, using, for example, the latest music styles, DVDs, texting and electronic games, and involving older young people who talked about their problems, were helpful and powerful in changing their perceptions. In one school, students said that an input from ' Prison Me No-Way!!!!' had made them more aware of the causes, consequences and penalties of crime and contributed to a reduction in anti-social behaviour in the community.[2]

27. The schools had an accurate picture of their students' needs because they worked closely with them. Members of other agencies felt that the schools valued them as full partners.

> A Connexions adviser felt part of the school team because she had dealings with pastoral tutors, the coordinator for personalised learning, the youth offending team, parents and carers, and the local further education colleges. Together with the high-quality data which she was given, the team approach enabled her to give the best advice during personal interviews.

> 'I find the school is very welcoming. They happily change things such as a location so I can work best with students on a one-to-one basis. I know they want me here. I have confidence the school will carry things through and help the child do what they are supposed to do.' (Behaviour support worker)

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[2] Prison Me No-Way!!!!/the No Way Trust was set up by prison officers to make an impact on the lives of young people and turn them away from crime: www.pmnw.co.uk.

> 'Pastoral leaders go the extra mile here and I'm confident that, when I go through a file, I will see a comprehensive list of strategies that have been tried before referral, including the involvement of other agencies where necessary. All the information is clear.' (Local authority officer for managed transfers)

28. In one case, closer liaison had led to improvements in local amenities.

> One boy had become tired of the lack of facilities in the neighbourhood. He worked with his tutor and the manager of pupil services to create a petition that led to a consultation project with the town planner. As a result, the council agreed to build a new skate park/BMX track and invited the boy and a small group of respondents to be part of the planning team. The civic concern of this boy, who had been disaffected, had led directly to a £100,000 extra investment in the community.

Support and mentoring

29. All the schools visited had dedicated areas where students with difficulties were able to have some respite from their peers and receive early, short-term intervention for behavioural, academic or emotional problems before being reintegrated. One of the schools, for example, provided three sessions of intensive literacy support each week for a group of disengaged students, where they took part in reading and writing on topics that they found particularly interesting. The sessions took place in a room that had been specifically designed to support students who had low self-esteem. Such areas were highly valued by all students, not just those who had become disaffected. Provision led to a reduction in the number of all types of exclusions because it acted as a base for reintegration.

30. The focus on creating the correct ambience for activities was also evident in other schools.

> The pupil services support area included specialist rooms that were designed to be calming, with background music and softened lighting. In these relaxed surroundings, teaching assistants and learning mentors monitored the students as they worked with specialist staff on developing skills for independent living.

The students reacted well to such an approach.

> 'I love this area, especially the sensory room. You can go there to be very quiet and think.' (Year 9 student)

31. The deployment of additional teaching and support staff in these specialist areas contributed greatly to raising students' achievement and improving their

behaviour. They helped the most vulnerable to think through their problems and consider ways of resolving them.

> Using the mood board, the students made a visual representation of their changing moods.

> The use of a reward board enabled students to celebrate their successes and to work with staff to get further rewards.

32. The schools tackled gaps in students' learning or personal development through specific training, such as anger management, team building, personal safety, self-esteem and sexual health.

> The course on anger management enabled aggressive Year 9 students to reflect on their actions, to improve their interpersonal skills and to learn to manage their emotions, even when being put under pressure by their peers.

> Year 7 students passed a football round the class. The member of the group receiving the ball chose a card and demonstrated or explained the positive attitude written on it. This was very effective in helping the students to develop greater confidence and self-esteem.

> A programme entitled 'Reach out trying to save lives' was successful in helping disaffected students in Years 10 and 11 to improve their examination grades. In six sessions, a professional life coach helped them to 'forget the past and concentrate on getting through accreditation and learning' and to discuss with each other, and with their families and friends, the strategies which they had found most helpful.

> Five boys, whose behaviour and attendance were poor and who had been involved in petty crime, were receiving intensive support on literacy and life skills. As part of this, they were preparing for a St John Ambulance first aid certificate. The tutor had an excellent rapport with the boys and his down-to-earth approach, drive and high expectations ensured that they worked hard and behaved well. As a result of this support, the boys' attendance was also improving.

> 'We do good things in this lesson. I know how to get somebody breathing again.' (Year 8 student discussing his life skills class)

33. In all the schools surveyed, staff, parents, carers and students said that mentoring had led to improved behaviour and attitudes for the vast majority of students. Adult mentors and coaches provided one-to-one support outside the classroom as well as in lessons. Students also received support from fellow students who acted as peer mentors or 'buddies'. Careful matching of the students ensured that both the mentor and the mentee gained from the experience. These approaches had been successful in several ways. One of the schools had introduced twice-yearly review meetings, where mentors met the students needing extra support and their parents or carers. Consequently, attendance at parents' meetings more than doubled from 40% to 85%. Mentoring also helped students to understand the importance of education and how it could help them to achieve their ambitions. As a result, school attendance improved and the number of young people continuing in education or training after the age of 16 increased considerably.

> 'My mentor is like a second mum at school and has helped me through absolutely everything. She talks, plays games and even makes football predictions.' (Year 8 student)

> 'Mentoring is really good. I can't remember when I last argued with a teacher.' (Year 11 student)

A personalised curriculum

34. All the schools in the survey adapted the curriculum to meet the specific needs of their students. At Key Stage 3, this most commonly involved the use of carefully chosen reading schemes, nurture groups, quality circle time and materials relating to the social and emotional aspects of learning.[2,3,4]

35. Flexibility in timetabling and teaching was important in ensuring that students enjoyed their work. One school, using the Learn2Learn life skills programme, found that the role models provided by male staff had a substantial impact on improving the behaviour of boys, particularly those where the father was not involved as a parent.[5] The boys developed greater emotional intelligence and learned how to deal with stress more effectively.

36. At Key Stage 4, the quality of the curriculum was better than at Key Stage 3 because greater use of alternative education and training establishments

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[2] For further information on nurture groups, see: www.nurturegroups.org.

[3] For further information on quality circle time, see: www.circle-time.co.uk.

[4] See: *Developing social, emotional and behavioural skills in secondary schools* (HMI 070048), Ofsted, 2007 (www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070048); Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) is a voluntary programme designed to develop the social and emotional skills of all pupils (www.teachernet.gov.uk/teachingandlearning/socialandpastoral/seal_learning/).

[5] For further information on Learn2Learn, see: www.learn2learn.org.uk.

created more flexibility in the curriculum and a better match to students' needs. The schools reported that this helped to improve students' engagement, raise standards and increase the numbers continuing with education beyond the age of 16.

37. The schools found that the most effective adaptations to the curriculum were the use of part-time college courses, the introduction of heritage languages, and the establishment of early examination entry groups, Saturday and holiday classes and revision courses.

> 'Off-site courses made us see what is expected in the real world. They helped us change our attitudes.' (Year 10 girl with a poor attendance record)

> 'I would have just walked out if the school had not been able to arrange two days at the college. I am doing painting and decorating, and next year I hope to get a full college course for a qualification.' (Year 10 student)

38. All the schools used different forms of accreditation to give the students a sense of achievement. To help raise students' self-esteem and increase their motivation, courses were practical in nature and included:

   ■ ASDAN Certificate of Personal Effectiveness[6]
   ■ adult literacy and adult numeracy qualifications[7]
   ■ TALENT4Life (a range of courses for students under the age of 16)[8]
   ■ Stride courses for staff working with pupils with special educational needs.[9]

39. Rewards, such as opportunities to go on trips or to gain awards, were a powerful incentive for students who struggled with school. Rewards motivated the students to apply themselves more and to achieve better grades at GCSE level. In the process, the students also gained the satisfaction of making a valuable contribution to the community. In one school, Year 10 and 11 students prepared for externally accredited sports leaders' awards by learning to coach their peers and primary-aged pupils in table tennis, dance, netball and rugby. In one of the schools, a group of students spent one day a week working with a youth club to support young people in the local community. This enabled them to prepare for bronze, silver and gold awards from the Prince's Trust. They enjoyed these activities, and involvement in them led to improved attendance.

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[6] For further information, see: www.asdan.org.uk/cope.php.
[7] For further information, see: www.edexcel.org.uk/quals/alan.
[8] For further information, see: www.talent4life.org.uk.
[9] For further information, see: www.stridetraining.co.uk.

> 'There is no point forcing all students through the same door. When they say "no", you have to find a different door.' (Headteacher)

Barriers to successful re-engagement

40. There were 32,987 students on roll at the schools involved in the survey and 4,347 (13%) had become disaffected with their learning at one time or another. Of these, the schools had managed to re-engage 3,404 (78%). However, 943 students (3% of the total population) remained disaffected.

41. Among the boys, disengagement led to high levels of disruptive or challenging behaviour. For the girls, it led to very high levels of absence (41% compared with 22% among boys). Girls' absence from school and the reasons for it have been largely overlooked in research literature. The survey's findings suggest an urgent need for a greater focus on this area.

42. The survey schools perceived three main barriers to successfully re-engaging students. The first related to parents or carers who were unwilling to work with the school and who sometimes colluded with the students to make the situation worse. One school had recorded 84 unsuccessful attempts to reach the parents of one student.

> 'The messages some of these learners get from their parents or carers negate the work of the school.' (Assistant headteacher)

43. In a few instances, the parents or carers lacked the skills to manage their children, and this undermined the attempts to support them. In a small number of cases, family crises or breakdowns had resulted in students remaining disengaged, despite concerted efforts by the schools.

44. The second barrier was seen as the influence of external factors, such as involvement in gangs, criminal activity or substance misuse, which proved more compelling than the influence of the school.

> 'Many of our students are disengaged from life, not just from school.' (Key worker)

45. The third barrier could involve other external factors as well as weaknesses in the schools' own provision. Some schools felt that significant delays in the provision of specialist services, such as child and adolescent mental health services, had contributed to students' continuing disengagement, as well as other factors such as being a young carer or being moved between care placements.

46. Other reasons that schools gave for failing to fulfil some students' needs included the reluctance of some staff to give students a fresh start when they returned to mainstream provision, inconsistencies in the way staff dealt with students, and ineffectual mentoring.

> 'Not all vulnerable students are identified within school. Some remain hidden if you cannot peel enough layers away to see the real problem.' (Headteacher)

Making re-engagement sustainable

47. Re-engaging disaffected students was not easy and it had taken time for the schools surveyed to develop their expertise in this area. The most successful aspects, such as monitoring and guidance, were an integral part of what was provided for all students. However, many of the critical components in re-engaging disaffected students relied on factors such as the extent to which staff were prepared to go the extra mile for students, partnership working with parents and carers, flexibility in meeting students' needs, and a readiness to compromise. The most successful schools had considered the implications of the strategies they used. This put them in a good position to ensure that the strategies which proved worthwhile were sustainable.

> 'Our success has been built up over time. You have to recognise that there is no quick fix. Years of consistent application and continual tweaks have brought us to this position. It is like "building up an onion" and adjusting as you go, knowing your school and students' needs, recognising that it requires a whole-school approach and the provision of whole-school training.' (Headteacher)

48. Funding was inevitably a factor to be considered, since more money had to be spent on the most demanding students than on others. To meet the high costs, the schools often drew on resources outside their normal budgets. This sometimes put them in an insecure position because it was unclear how long the funding would last, but they did not allow this to detract from their determination. One governor said: 'The vision comes first and the funding follows it.'

49. A headteacher from one school had met anxiety from a few staff about the high level of resources being allocated to the relatively few disengaged students. He was therefore very clear that the investment had to pay dividends and prove its effectiveness. He also made the benefits of the investment clear to the staff: it was not only benefiting the students themselves but also society in the longer term.

50. In the survey schools, all staff shared the same set of values. Nevertheless, there were some who were critical to success, who made things happen and led the way and whose departure could jeopardise the school's effectiveness. To plan for this, the most forward-looking headteachers ensured that they developed other staff who could share the work and who could take over if necessary.

Notes

Between September 2007 and February 2008, Ofsted undertook a survey of 29 secondary schools, including one academy and one pupil referral unit, selected because they had shown a decrease in unauthorised absences between 2004 and 2006 and had a record of sustained good practice in re-engaging disaffected students in their learning.

During their visits, inspectors held discussions with headteachers, teachers, support staff, parents and carers, students and governors. Through the Children's Rights Director for England, based in Ofsted, they also had access to the views of young people in care or living away from home.

Further information

Attendance in secondary schools (070014), Ofsted, 2007; www.ofsted.gov.uk/Publications/070014.

Developing social, emotional and behavioural skills in secondary schools (070048), Ofsted, 2007; www.ofsted.gov.uk/Publications/070014.

Evaluation of the impact of learning support units (HMI 2378), Ofsted, 2006; www.ofsted.gov.uk/Publications/2378.

Improving behaviour (HMI 2377), Ofsted, 2006; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/2377.

Improving behaviour and attendance in secondary schools (HMI 2477B), Ofsted, 2005; www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Education/Inclusion/Behaviour/Improving-behaviour-and-attendance-in-secondary-schools-2005.

Managing challenging behaviour (HMI 2363), Ofsted, 2005; www.ofsted.gov.uk/Publications/2363.

Parents, carers and schools (070018), Ofsted, 2007; www.ofsted.gov.uk/Publications/070018.

Pupil referral units: establishing successful practice in pupil referral units and local authorities (070019), Ofsted, 2007; www.ofsted.gov.uk/Publications/070019.

Good practice in re-engaging disaffected and reluctant students in secondary schools

Schools visited for this survey

Beal High School	Redbridge
Beaumont Leys School	Leicester City
Birley Community College	Sheffield
Cheltenham Bournside School and Sixth Form Centre	Gloucestershire
Featherstone High School	Ealing
Henry Compton Secondary School	Hammersmith & Fulham
Hereford Technology School, Grimsby	North East Lincolnshire
Jarrow School	South Tyneside
Prospect School	Reading
Rushcliffe School	Nottingham
Seven Kings High School	Redbridge
Solutions 4, Lincoln	Lincolnshire
St Francis of Assisi Technology College	Walsall
St John Fisher Catholic College, Dewsbury	Kirklees
St Mary's C of E High School	Barnet
St Mary's College	Kingston upon Hull
St Thomas Aquinas Catholic School	Birmingham
Staunton Community Sports College, Havant	Hampshire
The Astley Cooper School, Hemel Hempstead	Hertfordshire
The Brunts School, Mansfield	Nottinghamshire
The Cathedral CE (VC) High School	Wakefield
The Causeway School, Eastbourne	East Sussex
The Deepings School, Peterborough	Lincolnshire
The Kingsway School, Cheadle	Stockport

The Oldershaw School   Wirral

Thornton Grammar School   Bradford

Wales High School   Rotherham

Wembley High Technology College   Brent

West London Academy   Ealing

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