Combating Truancy and School Absenteeism in Wales: The Latest Developments

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses upon the Task and Finish Group's report on school attendance in Wales. The Task and Finish Group was established by the Welsh Assembly Government and met between 2002 and 2003. The report makes a number of short- and long-term recommendations for implementation. The report was accepted by the Welsh Assembly during 2003 and, since then, an implementation group has been established and started its work. The article begins by considering the link between deprivation and underachievement, particularly as it is important to set the higher authorized and unauthorized absence rates for some schools in Wales, when compared with most of the UK, into context. It then discusses the present position on attendance issues in Wales including the wide range of new initiatives which are endeavouring to redress the problems. Thereafter, recent British and international research is discussed before considering, in some depth, the present comparative position in England utilizing some findings from one English local education authority in the northwest. The article concludes with a detailed consideration of the implications of the Task and Finish Group's report for Wales and the nature of the tasks which will soon be undertaken in order to prioritize and improve school attendance rates throughout the Principality.

Background

Historically, south Wales was considered to have some of the highest rates of school absenteeism and truancy in Britain (Vaughan, 1976; Carroll, 1977; Rees, 1981; Reid, 1985). The causes of truancy, however, indicate a close

relationship between deprivation, poverty and familial disharmony (Reid, 1999). The link between deprivation and underachievement can be demonstrated by a more detailed look at the Cynon Valley, an area in which school absence rates are disproportionately high. Abercynon is within the worst 7 per cent of deprived wards in Wales. The Abercynon ward has a higher proportion of unemployed adults, overcrowded households and lone parents than the average ward throughout the rest of Wales and almost all of the United Kingdom. Education and health problems abound. Thirty-seven per cent of children entering their nursery schools have speech and/or language problems; 40.6 per cent of households contain a family member with a serious debilitating illness; prescriptions for antidepressants are one-third higher than in the rest of south Wales. In relation to overall health, Abercynon ranks 123 out of 864 wards in Wales. A person born in Abercynon in the mid–1990s can expect to die on average five years earlier than the average for someone born in England and four years younger than the average for the rest of Wales. Thirty-four per cent of the male and female population between sixteen and twenty-four are unemployed (Welsh Office, 1991).

However, the link between disaffection and school attendance goes even deeper. For example, in December 1999, the Bryncynon Community Revival Strategy (BCRS) reported that 76 per cent of respondents in the ward considered that drug abuse was the most important issue in the area. Drug abuse amongst the school-age population was reported to be much higher than average levels throughout Wales, as was alcohol abuse. Teenage pregnancies are also well above national levels. A very high proportion of girls become mothers for the first time or on subsequent occasions before the age of twenty (BCRS, 1999). The BCRS study also reported:

- low expectations and low morale were endemic amongst the community;
- a 'sense of depression' about the whole area;
- a lack of basic facilities and amenities such as shops, public services (for example doctors, chemists) and public-access spaces;
- significant tensions amongst residents within the community, including a fear of crime, anti-social behaviour and bullying;
- young people in the region felt little optimism for the future.

In some other parts of south Wales, 50 per cent of pupils are on free school meals. Some of the UK's other most deprived wards can be found in south Wales, such as Penrhiwceiber (Welsh Office, 1991; Green and Owen, 1992), and fewer adults in south Wales are likely to have achieved a degree, diploma

or other advanced-level qualification than in the rest of Wales and in other parts of England. Research has shown that family disadvantage and educational failure are strongly linked (Furlong, 1992). New research also highlights the difficulties which children experience when their parents separate and divorce, including the potential impact upon school attendance (Butler, 2003a, b).

It is against this background that research into school attendance in Wales should be considered because, if socio-economic differences within Wales and the rest of the UK were taken into account, overall rates of attendance and for truancy might not be too dissimilar.

The position in Wales

Recent statistics suggest that 10.4 per cent of all pupils in Wales (including those in independent schools) missed periods of schooling in 2000/01 for reasons of authorized or unauthorized absence (Welsh Assembly, 2003a). The lowest official rates of absence occurred in Gwynedd and Ceredigion. The highest official rates were in Cardiff, Swansea, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Caerphilly and Blaenau Gwent. Broadly, this pattern corresponds with differences in regional socio-economic differences, measured, for example, by children entitled to free school meals (Welsh Assembly, 2003a, table 2, p. 13; Zhang, 2003).

There is much greater variation, however, in the official statistics for un-authorized absence (Reid, 2002a; NFER, 2002a). The all-Wales figure is 1.6 per cent. The lowest returns for unauthorized absence occur in Merthyr Tydfil, Monmouthshire, Flintshire, Powys, Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire. Cardiff has unauthorized absence rates of two and a half times the national average for Wales. While figures have to be treated with caution, unauthorized absences are also disproportionately high in Swansea, Pembroke-shire, Caerphilly and Rhondda Cynon Taff (Welsh Assembly, 2003a: 13).

A variety of initiatives and sources of funding are currently used to tackle truancy and disaffection in Wales. These include grants for Education Support and Training, Disaffection; The Children and Youth Partnership; Youth Access Initiative; Play, Sure Start and Child Care Strategy; Children and Young People; Extending Entitlement; Children First Programme; New Opportunities Funding (Lottery); Youth Gateway Project; Basic Skills Agency; the Local Government Settlement (in particular, provision for the education psychology service; assessments and statementing); pupil referral units; behaviour support plans; Educating Otherwise than at School; excluded

pupils; pupil support; education welfare service; the 14–19 Project Team; Narrowing the Gap and initiatives at the Key Stage 2/3 transition.

In addition, the Home Office and Police Authority also support the Safer Schools Initiative and Positive Futures and Communications Against Drugs. Social services and voluntary organizations also organize a large number of projects aimed at combating truancy and disaffection. For example, the Cornerstone Gap Project in Swansea has taken up the challenge of serving its local community by working with disaffected young people including truants.

Schools, local education authorities (LEAs), education welfare teams and others are also involved in local initiatives to raise and improve attendance. In fact, there can be little doubt that a greater variety of school–based and caring professionals are engaged in preventative practice against truancy than ever before (Reid, 2003d). One such scheme is the Mountain Ash Partnership Out-of-School Learning Project (Reid, 2002c). The outcomes of this project have significantly helped to raise attendance and improve pupils' behaviour (Reynolds, 1996; Reid, 2003g) in one of the most deprived parts of both Wales and the United Kingdom (Furlong, 1992; BCRS, 1999). The Mountain Ash Project is but one good example of how successful alternative curriculum projects can help to raise pupils', parents' and the local communities' perceptions of schooling as well as promote good attendance and behaviour amongst a group of less able, deprived and disaffected pupils (Reid, 2002c; 2003g). Unfortunately, much of the good local practice which exists is unco-ordinated and there is comparatively little evidence of good practice in schools in the existing literature (O'Keefe et al., 1993; Reid, 2003f).

Recent British and international research

Recent research on truancy and absenteeism from school has focused upon individual aspects of the issues. Osler, Street, Lall and Vincent (2002), for example, suggest that truancy is a form of 'self-exclusion' on the part of girls. Truancy and/or school absenteeism have been found to be closely linked with deprivation (Zhang, 2003), a number of childhood pathologies (Woodward and Fergusson, 2000) including running away (de Man, 2000), disaffection and young offending (Ball and Connolly, 2000), alcoholism (Wichstrom, 1998; Miller and Plant, 1999), disturbed adolescent development (Baer, 1999), parenting styles (McNeal, 1999), pre-court sentencing information (Ball and Connolly, 1999), gang membership (Fritsch, Caeti and Taylor, 1999), drug usage (Lloyd, 1998), early conduct disorders (Fergusson and Horwood, 1998),

exclusion from school (Bratby, 1998; Audit Commission, 1998), health factors (Michaud, Delbos-Piot and Narring, 1998), pupils' personalities (Jones and Francis, 1995) and attitudes (Lewis, 1995), behaviour and levels of self-esteem and academic self-concept as well as attitudes towards parents and teachers (Reid, 1999) and curriculum arrangements in the compulsory phase of schooling (O'Keefe et al., 1993).

Evidence from research indicates that some schools have disproportionately high levels of truancy and other forms of absenteeism (Reid, 1985; 1986; 1987; 1988; 1999; 2000; O'Keefe et al., 1993). Some schools have experienced these problems consistently over a thirty-year period irrespective of policy (Reid, 2002a: see ch. 2). It is apparent that in order to combat truancy and absenteeism within some schools, it is often first necessary to change pupils', parents' and teachers' attitudes towards these schools as well as the pervading culture and ethos. The Scottish Council for Research in Education Study (SCRE, 1995) showed the clearest possible link between attendance and performance at every phase of schooling from the infant and primary stages to the later years of secondary education. Of course, any future wealth re-distribution programme may equalize some of the differences between regions and schools not only in Wales but throughout the rest of the UK.

Although there is a comparative absence of articles focusing upon good practice in dealing with individual pupil's case histories of absenteeism and in promoting whole-school approaches to combating truancy and absenteeism (Ofsted, 2001; Reid, 2003f), some new studies are beginning to emerge. For example, Orr-Munro (2002) has reported on the Safer Schools Partnership plans to station police officers in schools. This is in response to the finding that truants from schools are at the epicentre of daytime street crime. Whilst police see the scheme as vital, teachers are more cautious. In another project, school-based family social work schemes helped to halve rates of truancy in project schools (Pritchard and Williams, 2001). Malcolm (1996), Blyth (1999) and McCormack (1999) all make valuable suggestions for staff in schools on how to improve attendance by utilizing such ideas as role play and drama workshops.

Another approach emphasizes strategies to combat poor attendance but this is relatively new. There is little, if any, previous research into these schemes (Reid, 2002a). Nevertheless, there is some evidence for their potential (Reynolds, 1996). In fact, the potential of these schemes is almost as important for stressing the possibility of promoting positive school change, and providing an appropriate monitoring structure for tackling the issues, as anything else. The real intention should be to use the conceptual base and processes involved

in the procedure to attempt to reduce rates of truancy and absenteeism within schools and/or LEAs. Reid (2003a; 2003b; 2004) has recently produced evidence of how to introduce long-term strategic approaches into schools and LEAs using three different approaches. Elsewhere, Reid (2002a: 32–33) has provided details of nearly 120 short-term strategies which are useful helping to improve school attendance.

England and truancy

England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have all devised separate paths in the search for solutions on truancy and school absenteeism as the effects of asymmetric devolution begin to bite. In Northern Ireland processes are in place to increase significantly the number of education welfare officers involved in attendance cases. In Scotland, electronic registration schemes are in much wider usage than in Wales and currently the rest of the UK.

Most LEAs and schools have programmes to reduce truancy and absenteeism. Most LEAs promote their own policy documents on attendance, of which Blackpool (2002), Birmingham (2002), Kirklees (2002) and Stafford-shire (2002) are four good examples. Equally, the vast majority of schools now have policies on school attendance although many of these need revising and/or implementing on some aspects such as including appropriate re-integration and return–to–school strategies (Reid, 2002a). Also, there is often little synergy between LEA guidelines and those of local schools (Reid, 2003d). In fact, typically within LEAs, most schools have their own free-standing documents which are entirely different from one another.

New initiatives concerned with tackling truancy and school absenteeism have proliferated in England in recent years. These include attendance aspects in such major developments as the Connexions Service, Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, On Track, Pupil Support Grants, Children's Fund, Sure Start, changes in court procedures and fines, electronic registration schemes, truancy buster awards, cross-Whitehall groups to combat the link between truancy and crime, truancy 'sweeps' and a host of youth participation and community projects and local shopping centre schemes as well as selected LEAs receiving specialist payments in order to improve attendance and behaviour within schools in their area (Reid, 2002a). In addition, pioneer work is taking place within the 14–19 curriculum as attempts are made to find relevant and alternative curriculum schemes. While any number of appropriate short-term strategies are in place, it is clear that most of these, with the possible

exception of first-day response schemes, are making very little difference to overall local and national rates of daily attendance within schools (Reid, 2003f). Some LEAs have privately reported recent rises in levels of non-attendance possibly because of the longer-term effects of the national curriculum and the introduction of improved electronic registration schemes which are leading to more accurate attendance returns (Sheffield, 2001). Mentoring in schools with less able and disaffected pupils must be beginning to have an impact but, to date, evaluations on this aspect are relatively scarce (Reid, 2002b).

In England, it is clear that the Labour administration and schools are both doing a great deal to address the issue of truancy and non-attendance. One problem for them, however, is that it is much less difficult to show that they have been reducing levels of unauthorized absence and improving overall attendance rates when compared with, for example, league tables on exclusions which are, after all, a more malleable and professionally controlled phenomenon anyway.

Nevertheless, by 1 April 2003, the list of recent innovations in England was impressive (Reid, 2002b) and indicates the extent of the government's determination and financial commitment to resolve the issues as well as the profession's attempt to work with them to overcome attendance difficulties. Thus, the government is initially investing £50m in the form of behaviour improvement projects in the thirty-four English LEAs with the highest levels of street crime and truancy. Behaviour and education support teams are being set up in almost all of these areas and will be extended to more than 200 areas by 2006.

Nine LEAs have begun to act as pathfinders for fast-track truancy prosecutions. More LEAs will follow suit soon. In these schemes, parent(s) who have condoned or ignored their children's truancy will be given twelve weeks to achieve a sustained improvement in their children's attendance or face court. A court date will be set by the end of the prescribed period. Parents then face maximum fines of up to £2,500 each or, in extreme cases, imprison-ment. However, the first thirteen parents prosecuted under this scheme, by Thurrock Council, Essex, walked free from court (Greenhill, 2003). The initiative got off to a bad start partly because several parent(s) did not keep their court date and also because some of the cases selected were criticized by the local magistrates. In other parts of the country, magistrates prefer using parenting orders, including making parents attend parenting classes, rather than implementing other forms of punishment in truancy cases.

Truancy sweeps have taken place in all but the three smallest LEAs in England. In the worst-performing LEAs on attendance, truancy patrols

occurred either daily or weekly. In December 2002, truancy patrols in England stopped more than 20,000 out-of-school pupils. Of these, 7,300 had no excuse; the remainder were found to be with a parent. Some cities regularly round up between 250 and 500 pupils each patrol. Sefton has the lowest recorded level to date – twelve. The highest reported rate occurred in Salford: 720 pupils. Bristol has reported between 250 and 600 absentees being picked up by their truancy patrols as have a number of other city conurbations.

The DfES is considering introducing parenting contracts possibly as part of the Anti–Social Behaviour Bill. Under this proposal, parents will be asked to sign a contract to ensure their children attend school. If they fail to do so, the parents will be forced to attend parenting classes and help to achieve a sustained improvement in their child's attendance within a specified period. If a parent refuses to sign or breaks the contract, they will be prosecuted or, under a clause in the Anti–Social Behaviour Bill, receive a fixed penalty notice. The rates for this have yet to be set but the DfES have suggested a fine of £80 per offence. How and by whom this money will be collected is fast becoming an issue. Presently, the Bill intends giving powers to the police, head teachers and education welfare officers to issue and collect these fixed penalty notices. Police forces are also to be given extra money to help them to meet the costs of patrolling around those schools which are most affected by truancy, antisocial behaviour and crime. Police patrols for this purpose are to be extended in late 2003.

Only very few LEAs do not have creative policies to combat truancy. Yet, surprisingly, some LEAs attendance policy guidelines are themselves out of date. In Wales, some LEAs still do not have policy documents on attendance at all. Many secondary schools too have no, poor or little documentation on attendance strategies, a serious weakness as the Bradford–Smart (2002) case illustrated. Other notable weaknesses include schools and LEAs failing to manifest and operationalize clear re-engagement, return-to-school and reintegration strategies. Ofsted has recently significantly tightened up on this part of their inspection process.

The Ofsted 'trigger' point for secondary schools was raised from 90 to 92 per cent for secondary schools on 1 September 2002. The primary threshold rate of 95 per cent remains unchanged. Attendance rates in designated special schools, pupil referral units and alternative curriculum centres have become an issue. The revised attendance target for 2004 is to reduce truancy by 10 per cent, sustain the lower level thereafter and to continue to improve it subsequently.

The Education Social Work/Education Welfare Service is also currently undergoing significant change. The government believes closer relationships

between education welfare officers (EWOs) and head teachers are more successful in tackling truancy. The DfES is consulting on the feasibility of basing more education welfare officers in individual schools rather than within LEAs (NFER, 2002a; 2002b). These EWOs will then be employed and report directly to the head teacher rather than the LEA. One problem here is that head teachers may not welcome the additional administrative burden which the legal and social demands of the tasks will demand. Nor may they have sufficient in-house knowledge of how to manage all the multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary processes in tackling truancy and attendance cases effectively. The Education Social Work Service is also currently attempting to define and agree minimum threshold standards which should be implemented in service-level agreements between schools, the LEA and the profession. This has become more important now that up to thirty-five different professional parties might be involved in individual attendance cases (Reid, 2003c; 2003d; 2003e). Even within particular schools, attendance cases are no longer the sole responsibility of the ESW/EWO service but may involve classroom assistants, home–school liaison officers, attendance officers, learning mentors, personal advisers and first-day response staff (Reid, 2002b).

These complications are evident when we examine the workload of one education welfare service in session 2001 to 2002 throughout a school year. The LEA in question is Sefton (Reid, 2003d; 2003e). This is a valuable LEA to use as an example because it is medium-sized, covers a significant area of deprivation (mainly around Bootle), contains a fifteen-mile rural region (between Formby and Ormskirk) and has a middle-class end (Southport). The ESW service contained twenty-four staff at the time of the evaluation. The potential workloads of individual staff in the service ranged from between 1,000 and 2,500 pupils to 10,000 plus pupils per officer. The evidence obtained from an audit of the service (Reid, 2003e) found that parents and pupils in Sefton suffer from the full range of dysfunctional-family syndromes (see Reid, 1999: chs 4–6).

These symptoms include physical, sensory and learning disabilities, mental health problems, child protection issues, domestic violence, inter-family conflicts, learning deficits, the full range of special needs, alcohol and drug abuse. At present, to a lesser or greater extent, the existing EWS staff are engaged in the full range of these social work and family support activities. Whilst it is clear there is a lot of already extremely good practice in Sefton, the process of 'reciprocation' between staff in different service areas needs a great deal of strengthening. The same is also true of some basic communication processes (Reid, 2003d).

The EWS is an extremely busy service and handles many external referrals which are not solely related to attendance. There are, for example, some 500 plus telephone calls coming into the EWS base room every week. In the previous twelve months, it issued 172 employment permits and 391 entertain-ment licences which enable pupils under 16 to perform in theatrical productions. The EWS was involved in a total of 2,423 attendance cases of which only 331 were with pupils with less than 50 per cent school attendance. There were 134 child protection cases and a further 105 cases involving emotional or psychological support. In addition, it was involved with 224 cases of alleged bullying and 410 pupils with behavioural problems (without any known major attendance difficulties). Moreover, 254 referrals were made to the EWS for a whole variety of familial reasons including bereavements, self–harm, school transfers, medical problems and asylum–related issues. Finally, the service was engaged in 346 miscellaneous cases involving pupils although none of these were related primarily to specific attendance concerns. Although predominantly an attendance-related organization, Sefton EWS is not exclusively so.

In summary, the EWS in Sefton mainly dealt with cases of significant, but not major, cases of absenteeism. Only in one case out of seven was the pupil missing school for at least half the prescribed time. More worrying were the following factors:

• 2,100 pupils were being supported by the social services department;
• 401 other pupils were being looked after in the care of the LEA;
• a large number of Special Educational Needs related problems; of these, there were growing difficulties with the number of pupils from travellers' homes, exclusions, home-school tutees (threefold increase in one year) and school refusal cases.

The numbers of pupils with emotional and/or behavioural difficulties were also on the increase. The LEA has since significantly increased its provision and staffing for its full range of alternative curriculum and DfES-funded projects including: the appointment of a full–time attendance and alternative curriculum manager; starting an IMPACT programme; the development of primary–secondary transition projects; the extension of its out-of-school provision (see also: Reid, 2002c); the involvement in Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zone Initiatives; as well as having one of the best behavioural support back–up services in the country.

Societal changes

The evidence from Sefton clearly indicates that whilst more good practice is taking place than ever before, there is no shortage of clients. Why? There are several reasons for this state of affairs. First, within society; British society is trying to get to grips with and understand the implications of recent legislative changes: human rights, first-day absence, equal opportunities, disabilities, race relations and so forth. We are all living in a pluralistic, multicultural society, in which pupils are maturing much earlier than in previous generations, and familial breakdown continues to cause official concern and anxiety (Social Exclusion Report, 1998).

Second, some of the inequalities currently impacting upon pupils at school and at home include the adverse affects of poor schools, poor quality housing, poverty, teenage pregnancy, drugs and alcohol abuse, mental health problems (amongst parents as well as pupils: the 'age of stress'), poor parenting skills, peer pressure, bullying, victimization and harassment (Reid, 1999: chs 4–6 and Reid, 2002: ch 1).

Third, parental attitudes towards the attendance of their offspring vary, often dependent upon their level of interest in schooling (Reid, 2002a: ch 9). There have been considerable changes in family patterns within society. The influence of religion and of extended families is often much less than in previous generations. There are now second-, third- and fourth- generation 'truant' families and many of these are living off and dependent upon state aid: income support, housing benefit. There has been a large rise in single-parent families and the number of women choosing to live alone (Census, 2001). The impact of separation and divorce upon children should never be underestimated (Butler, 2003a; 2003b).

Fourth, within schools, pupils and their parents now formally enjoy much more freedom of choice to diversify and select the schools their children attend. Staff in schools are feeling the stress of the increasing demands upon them imposed by target setting, workloads, the publication of league tables, changes of roles and responsibilities within schools, examination and curric-ulum pressures as well as the differences between rural, urban, and primary-secondary provision and conflicting instructions emanating from on high (NUT, 2003). For example, teachers are being asked to accelerate learning for the gifted at the same time as attempting to widen access and learning opportunities, reduce exclusion and raise attendance. Proposed curriculum developments will soon present new challenges in the hope of enabling either more and better GCSE passes through the national curriculum whilst, at the

same time, improving the alternative and vocational curriculum for 14–19 year olds and introducing the new Welsh Baccalaureate. The management of pastoral care is facing further scrutiny as joined-up interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches will gain an increasing foothold particularly after the government's Anti-Social Behaviour Act is introduced.

Fifth, and finally, the nature of truancy per se has seen radical changes over the past quarter of a century. There are now far fewer traditional truants than in previous times (Tyerman, 1968; Reid, 1985). More pupils are missing school for school-based reasons (Reid, 1999) possibly because of the growing influence of the national curriculum (Reid, 2002a). Significant differences occur in the reasons given between the first time and the persistent stage of truancy. Bullying is on the increase in some schools and in some local communities. Specific lesson absence and post-registration truancy are significant problems in some schools (O'Keefe et al., 1993). Much more truancy is premeditated and preplanned. There has been a rise in the number of disaffected girls and in the perceived 'loutish' behaviour of some boys. However, the relative attainment of boys and girls is a keenly debated area in recent educational research as is the importance attached to 'laddish' behaviour as a cause of boys, underachievement (Social Exclusion Report, 1998). In truancy surveys, 'boredom' in schools is often cited as a factor. More and more pupils feel unsafe in schools and on their way to and from school. Teaching styles within schools have changed partly due to the implementation of the National Curriculum and associated 'testing' and 'attainment' targets. Consequently, the profession has witnessed a change in the fundamental relationship between itself and its pupils and, in some schools, teacher–pupil relationships have suffered as staff 'chase their tails' in their daily endeavour to keep up with tasks. All five of these factors – the changes within society, the home, schools, parenting and in the nature of truancy itself – have had significant consequences upon pupils' levels of self-esteem, attitudes, behaviour and attendance (Reid, 1999).

Action in Wales

The Labour administration in Wales has proved no less determined than its counterparts in other parts of the UK to combat truancy and other forms of pupils' absence from schools. For example, in April 2003, the first parent of a persistent truant from Llanelli was jailed for twenty-eight days. The Welsh Assembly established a Task Force to produce a report on reducing truancy and absenteeism in both the short and long term (Welsh Assembly, 2003a). Its

key short-term recommendations are: to simplify the Welsh Assembly Government's guidance on clarifying absence as indicated in Circular 3/99; to establish how many primary schools have readily available figures on attendance rates; to commence an audit of the methods of passing information between primary and secondary schools on individual pupils' attendance; to undertake an audit and evaluation of LEAs' spending on attendance issues, particularly the destination of Grants for Education Support and Training (GEST) funding and the pilot projects for tackling disaffection; to undertake an audit of schools' and LEAs' attendance policies, how up to date these are and how well they link together; to consider the approaches to be used in pursuing legal action on parental-condoned cases; and, to perform truancy sweeps on a regular basis in each LEA.

Long-term recommendations are: to review and cost the extent of electronic registration schemes throughout Wales and to develop a strategy for extending their use to an appropriate standard; to review the funding, role and responsibilities of the education welfare service in Wales to include professional development; to clarify and simplify the funding streams used to tackle truancy in Wales; to establish systems to share good and innovative practice between professions on tackling truancy in Wales; to carry out a pilot study on reducing absence in two schools to assess the extent to which this is possible thereby informing future funding; to increase the level of intervention at primary school level; to develop a framework for multi-agency working, including the necessary training elements; and, to review the process of taking attendance cases through magistrates' courts, including the link between magistrates' clerks and the educational welfare service as well as the timetable for hearing attendance cases.

The Task and Finish Group report was considered by the Welsh Assembly in late February 2003 and approved to go forward. Subsequently, a new group to oversee the implementation of the Task and Finish Group's recommendations has been established to oversee the implementation of the group's action plan.

The implications of the Welsh Assembly's report

The Welsh Assembly has set the group established to implement the Task and Finish report (Welsh Assembly, 2003a) a demanding series of tasks which are set out in the provisional action plan (Welsh Assembly, 2003b). The remainder of this article is devoted to a consideration of these short- and longer-term issues. The current action plan is provisional. The plan itself, the timetable for

action and the specific issues for progression are likely to change and be amended in the light of forthcoming discussions with professional partners on specific details. The partner professions include head teachers' and teachers' and governing body professional associations, the police, social services, education welfare officers, LEAs, the voluntary sector, Careers Wales, HMI, Estyn, youth teams and others.

Short-term issues

One of the first major tasks is to revise Circular 3/99 in 2003 and this work is progressing well. The Welsh Assembly is keen to give a 'Welsh flavour' to attendance policies and strategies. It is widely considered within the profession that Circular 3/99 has made the registration and collection of attendance data unnecessarily bureaucratic. It has not helped teachers' workloads and has led to widespread abuse of the data by schools and LEAs (Reid, 2002a: ch. 1). It is intended to produce a new and clearer document for use in schools which will simplify processes and which will require new legislation. Arrangements will also need to be made to make any necessary adaptations to electronic registration systems.

Discussions between the Welsh Assembly's Pupil Support Division and LEAs suggest that the majority of primary schools are already providing their attendance data to LEAs, although specific information on individual pupils' attendance is not always reaching the appropriate schools. The Task and Finish Group agreed that gathering information on primary school attendance is essential, particularly in the context of focusing more on intervention at an early age. The National Assembly for Wales will shortly begin, therefore, to collect attendance data from primary schools for its own use.

Initially, 2002/03 data will be collected retrospectively. An assessment will be made as to whether these data have been recorded on a consistent basis across all schools. Thereafter, from 2003/04, these data will be collected annually. The information provided will enable the Welsh Assembly to determine the levels of pupils' overall attendance and unauthorized absence from schools in Wales.

The Welsh Assembly would like to undertake an audit and evaluation of LEAs, spending in Wales on attendance issues, particularly the usage and destination of GEST funding and the pilot projects on disaffection. This is a complex task. The allocation of GEST funding has traditionally been left to LEAs and has been spent very differently. Therefore, LEAs will be asked to make available a report detailing how all GEST funding on school attendance and behaviour has been spent. This will become an annual commitment. The nine LEAs which received funding for pilot projects to tackle disaffection will

also be asked to provide regular reports on the progress of the projects along with an evaluation once the project has become fully established. These will be placed on the National Assembly for Wales' website.

The Action Group will be asked to oversee:

- an audit of the methods of passing information between primary and secondary schools on individual pupils' attendance;
- an audit of schools' and LEAs' attendance policies, how up to date these are and how well they link together;
- the approaches to be used in pursuing legal action on parent–condoned truancy cases.

To reduce the burden on LEAs, the data will be collected through one survey. The information collected will be vital in helping to revise Circular 3/99.

The Action Task Group will meet three times a year to consider best practice and ongoing research activity within Wales in school attendance issues. The membership of the original group is to be expanded to include Governors Wales and a primary school head.

Truancy sweeps in Wales are to be expanded and will take place on a more regular basis. New guidelines on truancy sweeps in Wales are being developed. There would be a Wales–wide week of truancy sweeps in June 2003. This will provide an opportunity to develop best practice guidelines for undertaking sweeps which would include aspects such as working with police, use of language with parents and children, information gathering, best methods of reintroducing pupils back to schools and follow-up monitoring action by schools, police, parents and the education welfare service in Wales. Currently, the number of pupils who are being repeatedly picked by truancy patrols on different days is fast becoming a major issue. It is clear that too few schools currently have appropriate return-to-school and reintegration strategies in place.

Longer-term issues

There is a need to review and cost the extent of electronic registration systems throughout Wales. Subsequently, there will be a need to develop a system to ensure its usage throughout Wales reaches certain minimum standards. It is hoped to complete this major task by 2005.

A review of the existing funding, role, responsibilities, levels, training and accreditation of the education welfare service in Wales is being planned. The review will need to take account of the work currently ongoing throughout

the UK to develop national occupation standards for people delivering a support service to young people.

There is a need to clarify, simplify and review the large number of different funding streams currently being used to tackle truancy, attendance and disaffection (see earlier). In the first instance, a simple easy-to-read guide will be sent to LEAs and other interested parties summarizing existing sources of funding and their distribution.

New systems to share good and innovative practice on tackling truancy will be introduced. There are a number of potential approaches to sharing good practice. In order to ensure that LEAs and schools are sharing innovative practice, it is intended to have a Wales-wide rather than a regional approach. Preliminary discussions with LEAs suggest that a 'careers-fair' approach may be the best option for this work as this would allow professionals to pick and choose the fields they need to explore. As well as bringing people together, it will be useful to have a store of information on the National Assembly for Wales website. For example, as part of the Narrowing the Gap project, work has already begun on a compendium of school improvement initiatives. This might provide a suitable vehicle to expand to include initiatives tackling disengagement/disaffection and attendance issues.

The group will be asked to oversee a pilot project on reducing absences in two schools to assess the extent to which this is possible and to help evaluate how funding should be focused. The original intention of the recommenda-tion was to fund projects to improve attendance in two schools with very different socio-economic conditions and evaluate the level of change. This would help formulate future strategy on how best to focus funding to tackle attendance issues. There are, however, a number of approaches currently being undertaken throughout the UK from which information could be gathered on the most effective methods of tackling low attendance and for this reason the objective within this recommendation will be widened to include a consideration of the utility of existing projects. In order to do this effectively, resources will be needed to carry out the initial research. This initial research will then be used to decide on future research strategies.

The group will increase the potential for earlier intervention at primary school level and, in particular, put systems in place to ensure that individual pupils' attendance figures are shared between primary and secondary schools. The existing Education Strategic Plans (ESPs) and Behaviour Support Plans probably represent the best vehicles for monitoring a strategic move to earlier intervention. A statement has been put into the additional information required for Supplementary ESPs for 2004–05 from LEAs that should give

some account of how they plan to tackle the recommendations arising from the Task and Finish Group report on attendance and its action plan (Welsh Assembly, 2003a; 2003b).

The group intends to develop a framework for multi-agency working, including the necessary training elements. It will be important to restrict the boundaries of the actions arising from this recommendation as there is, for example, potential for straying beyond the remit into wider areas such as joint working between education and social service departments. The specific action will be focused on providing good practice guidelines on how various agencies could work together to tackle attendance issues. As there is such a crossover between attendance issues and disengagement/disaffection, the content of these guidelines will need to be clearly defined, taking into account other work going on in this area.

Finally, the group will review the process of taking attendance cases through magistrates' courts, including the link between magistrates' clerks and the educational welfare service and the timetable for hearing attendance cases. In this regard, some work will need to be done in the short term to react to guidelines for magistrates' courts and youth offending teams being produced by a DfES working group. It will need to be determined whether these are appropriate for Wales and fit in with Welsh policy. Therefore, a subsequent group involving all interested parties including Welsh Assembly Government officials, magistrates, and the educational welfare service will be set up to discuss the specific approach required in Wales, using the work carried out in England as a starting point.

Conclusion

The Welsh Assembly is beginning to take its responsibilities for raising pupils' levels of attendance and reducing truancy very seriously. It is likely that the initial work of the Attendance Task and Finish Group report on attendance and truancy and its subsequent action plan to be overseen by a revised group will formulate the implementation of an all-Wales approach towards tackling the issues. At the same time, efforts to improve attendance and reduce truancy are also taking place in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Consequently, as the politicians, professionals and civil servants in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland grow in confidence, it is likely that increasingly different policies and practice will permeate throughout the UK on attendance issues. This result of asymmetric devolution is likely to be further increased as England moves towards the introduction of regional government.

The work of the Welsh Assembly Task Force should begin to inject some much needed urgency into improving attendance rates within schools in Wales. It is hoped that this will, in turn, lead to a significant improvement in the Welsh position in UK–wide league tables. Attendance issues, too, should soon receive a much higher priority and profile within schools and LEAs within Wales. In turn, this should do much to help further to raise standards and performance outcome data within Wales, not least, for example, in the number of pupils achieving five or more A to C GCSE passes.

Finally, the work on attendance will increasingly need to be aligned to the work of the 14–19 Task Group in Wales and, in particular, with the move towards the introduction of more vocational and alternative curriculum routes within schools and the new Welsh Baccalaureate. There is increasing evidence that alternative curriculum schemes are amongst the most successful measures for combating poor attendance amongst disaffected pupils (Reid, 2002c; 2003g).

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