

## PAPER 3 for CHILDREN'S COMMITTEE

### UPDATE ON NATIONAL BEHAVIOUR AND ATTENDANCE REPORT (NBAR): IMPROVING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE IN WALES

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#### BACKGROUND

In early 2011, the Minister presented his new twenty-point plan to raise performance & standards in Welsh Education in the light of the disappointing PISA results & the Chief Inspector's (CI's) end-of-cycle Report. During this presentation, the Minister indicated that there was to be a new evaluation of the NBAR Report. He announced that all teachers in Wales would shortly be encouraged to follow new modules in behaviour management; one of the original core NBAR recommendations. He also regretted the slow implementation of the Report & some of its other key recommendations.

Subsequently, a meeting took place between the Minister, Chris Tweedale (CT) & myself as the former Chair of the original NBAR Report to consider & reflect upon the issues. It was agreed that a second NBAR Update Report would be written shortly after the Welsh Assembly Elections to focus specifically upon how school attendance in Wales could be raised & truancy reduced. This new Update would be submitted to the Minister directly & copied to CT for their consideration.

#### INTRODUCTION

There is widespread & consistent evidence that rates of pupils' non-attendance & truancy have been higher in Wales, especially in the large urban cities & valleys of SE Wales, since records began. At no stage have national & overall rates of unauthorised absence & truancy ever been better than those for England, despite there being serious problems in several parts of both England & Scotland. More worryingly, over the last 25/30 years, rates of non-attendance have been rising slowly in primary schools at key stage 2, whilst a slight majority of girls miss school at the secondary phase despite truancy being a largely male phenomenon until the 1970's.

Explicitly, there has been a steady increase in overall absence amongst primary school children across Wales in both authorised & unauthorised absence. Overall primary absences in Wales (7.9%) are much higher than in England (5.34%). Merthyr LA is shown as having the worst absence rates at key stage 2, although there are a large number of primary schools whose overall rates of attendance fall below 90% with subsequent knock-on effects into the secondary phase. Remarkably, in the recent set of statistics, 2130 Welsh primary pupils missed 30% of all possible sessions with 389 pupils missing more than 50%. This is worrying news for the performance of Welsh pupils in standardised tests for the future & is a trend which needs curtailing urgently if the performance of Wales is to rise in international league tables on Education. These statistics tell only half the tale as they are linked undoubtedly to literacy & numeracy, pupils' home backgrounds & to the attitude of some parents & carers towards Education & schooling.

The rise in non-attendance at the primary phase means that some secondary schools are admitting pupils who have been regularly making between 70-90% of possible attendances whilst at key stage 2. Amongst other reasons, this has contributed to a growth in non-attendance at key stage 3. Traditionally, pupils' non-attendance has always been at its worst at key stage 4 and, in particular, in year 11. Unfortunately, the levels of non-attendance at key stages 2 & 3 & for year 10 pupils considerably exceed non-attendance levels for the 1970's, despite all the recent government action, legislative changes to court & punishment processes, the improved monitoring procedures within schools & all the good practice applied by teachers, schools & local authorities (LA's) in Wales.

The rationale for this Update is that it is possible to improve rates of school attendance further throughout Wales in a number of different ways, depending upon how innovative & far reaching the Welsh Government (WG) is prepared to be & after taking cognisance that new legislation might be required to implement all the ideas. It is my contention that if all the ideas proposed in this paper were followed it would soon be possible for Wales to outperform the rest of the United Kingdom (UK) on overall rates of school attendance & to reduce truancy significantly. However, a great deal of consistent hard work would need to be applied by educational professionals & the DES in Wales for a considerable period of time.

For the purposes of this Update, an outline of my ideas for the best way forward is now presented. These are supplemented in Appendix 1 by one of my forthcoming papers which supplies further evidence & a reference base, although some of the other 70-odd papers which I have published in this field since 2002 alone also have merit & contain other potential solutions. For example, my paper in Educational Review, 60,4,345-359 on the causes of non-attendance: an empirical study contains many ideas & much evidence from a variety of perspectives & is apparently, one of the most downloaded papers of the last five years according to a recent letter I received from the Journal's Editor.

#### THE CAUSES OF NON-ATTENDANCE & TRUANCY

The causes of pupils' non-attendance & truancy are well known & are easily accessible as for example, the author has written a number of texts & academic articles in this field, amongst others. Traditionally, the original view up until the 1970's, was that pupils' non-attendance was related to home background. Between the late seventies & now researchers have shown that:

- a) Rates of truancy & non-attendance varied considerably even between schools located in similar homogeneous areas, such as the South Wales valleys.
- b) Most absentee pupils manifest a combination of social (including home background factors) psychological & institutional reasons for missing school. Interviews with persistent school absentees repeatedly confirm that around 85% have one or more school-based reasons for missing school; more school-based reasons are given the older the pupil is at the time of the interview. School-based reasons are often too long to list & vary considerably by school. Explicitly, bullying may be the main reason given by pupils from one school but not occur or be mentioned by a single pupil from a different school. The same can be true of purported cyber bullying. Equally, pupils' curricular dislikes often vary by school/teacher. However, amongst the most regularly disliked subjects are PE/Swimming amongst teenage girls, Welsh (in certain schools/areas) & certain academic subjects amongst less able pupils. Most pupils however, value highly the study of basic subjects such as English.

- c) There is often a single initial cause for younger-aged pupils missing school. When this single issue is not resolved, pupils' non-attendance is likely to grow until it reaches the persistent stage. Some pupils graduate more quickly towards the persistent stage than others for reasons of which we cannot be certain. This is true for both boys & girls.
- d) Most persistent absentees blame their teachers & schools rather than their parents or carers for their failure to attend schools. Psychological studies (eg using repertory grids) show that whilst pupils make allowances for their parents' shortcomings, they do not give similar leeway to their teachers. Supply & temporary staff are frequently not liked or respected.
- e) Parents of persistent school absentees have been found to hold a more negative view of education, schooling & teachers than any other single parental group. Likewise, parents & carers of persistent absentees & truants are likely to have been school absentees or truants themselves. Some familial groups in South Wales now contain third & fourth generational truant members. Parents or carers of regular absentees are less likely to attend school events such as parents' evenings than other parental groups.
- f) Psychologically, persistent school absentees have lower levels of self-esteem & academic self-concepts than their peers, even when compared with those in the same forms in school & from similar social & home backgrounds. Both boy & girl persistent school absentees have been found to have equally low levels of self-esteem at the highest levels of statistical significance than both their academic & form group peers. Studies from different parts of the world have confirmed these data.
- g) Many persistent absentees or truants begin their histories of criminal activity whilst truanting. Approximately, 80% of young offenders were truants. Cases of shoplifting for example, decrease on days when truancy patrols monitor shopping centres. Boys continue to conduct more serious criminal offences whilst out-of-school than girls at a rate of between 6 or 8 to one & to get prosecuted more often dependent upon study or region of the UK. However, the rise of girl gangs & gang-related activity has grown in recent years. Bullying (in all its forms) is more frequently given as a reason for non-attendance than twenty or thirty years ago. There has been a significant recent rise in cyber bullying which is believed to have a relationship to increased non-attendance in some schools in parts of the UK.
- h) Psychological studies & case work research suggest that up to 80% of all non-attendance cases may not be about attendance per se but often are symptomatic of a pupils' plea for help on other issues when all other avenues have failed. Therefore, resolving pupils' attendance may require other issues to be resolved first (eg persistent arguments within the family between the parents or familial bullying).
- i) The Cazbah Study(2008) for the NBAR Report found that both primary & secondary-aged pupils were well aware of the requirements to attend school regularly, to behave well when in school & the consequences of non-attendance whilst at school & in later life. This included pupils from a cross-section of schools in different regions throughout Wales, including some attending a pupil referral unit.
- j) Research has consistently shown a very high correlation between school-age truancy & adult criminality, prison sentences, unemployment, frequent job changes, divorce, reliance upon the state (income support, housing benefit) & mental health problems, amongst a range of other factors. The same results are replicated from studies conducted in the US & from other parts of the world. On some measures, truancy is the best single predictive measure

&, in economic terms, its longer-term consequences cost the State millions of pounds annually.

- k) Research from England has found that some schools' attendance rates are made worse by the repeated non-attendance of a small group of persistent absentees.
- l) Rates of attendance vary considerably within pupil referral units (PRU's); even those located within the same area/LA. NB There are currently no officially-prescribed national rates of attendance for PRU's & attendance rates between PRU's vary considerably. In one of the papers I published a few years ago on the performance of PRU's in England, daily attendance rates were found to vary from between 20 to over 80%. Heads of PRU's often refer to 80% as being the 'gold standard.'
- m) Cases of early intervention with young absentees stand more than six times the chance of being successful than late interventions; the earlier the intervention the better. Interventions with pupils in years 10 & 11 are rarely successful once they have reached the persistent stage.
- n) Back in the 1950's/1960's, most truancy was conducted by "lonely, isolated pupils with deficient home backgrounds." (Tyerman, 1968). Today, much truancy is group orientated & is pre-planned.
- o) There has never been a study of post-registration or specific lesson absence in Wales. One study found that that this accounted for a majority of school absences in London. These absences however, are excluded from official statistics. Similarly, spot checks on school attendance conducted at different times of the school day or on different days of the week have found school attendance to be much lower in some schools than shown in the official registers. One school in South Wales was found to have less than half its pupils present in a mid-afternoon session, although, at the time, it was decided not to publish this finding.
- p) Studies conducted using truancy patrols conducted in for example, shopping centres regularly report parental-condoned absenteeism to be the highest determining factor, especially amongst younger-age children & girls.
- q) Rates of non-attendance have remained persistently & consistently high amongst certain secondary schools throughout Wales, more especially in such places as the larger City-LA's (Cardiff, Swansea, Newport), the South Wales Valleys & the North East Wales coastal area (eg Rhyl).
- r) In England, approximately 80% of schools placed in special measures had an attendance-based reason/s for OFSTED making their decision; higher in some parts of the country. In Wales, proportionally fewer schools have been placed in special measures whether for their attendance record or for other reasons.
- s) There have been very few specific studies on pupils' non-attendance within the primary school, especially at key stage 2. Similarly, ethnicity has not been a variable in studies on school attendance although it has been used as a core variable in recent projects examining exclusions in England.
- t) There is a growing band of evidence (mainly conducted through case studies) that pupils given 'second chances' after leaving school, including pupils who were absentees or truants, can perform much better between the ages of 16-18 after receiving a fresh start or in adulthood.
- u) Despite methodological & definitional changes over the categorisation of authorised or unauthorised absences when marking school registers, overall national levels of attendance

have been little changed in the last 20 years in either Wales or England. Variations between & within individual & local schools in rates of both authorised & unauthorised absences do however, frequently occur.

- v) There is a growth in the number of schools who record pupils taking holidays during term-time without the consent of their head teacher. However, some studies show a variation in how this category is marked in the register. Equally, some schools & LA's in England make more use of the 'study leave' category than others.
- w) The overwhelming evidence is that the existing law relating to school attendance as set out in the 1944 & 1996 Education Acts, amongst others, only works partially as the penalties, although increased significantly since 1997, are widely considered to be ineffective. Jailing parents has been useful for publicity purposes & for enforcement reasons but little else. Often parents do not pay imposed fines & these are eventually written off. Only a very small proportion of persistent absentee cases referred to the LA's & Education Welfare Service (EWS) ever find their way to court &, in some ways, court prosecutions have become more difficult since the Children Act 2004 came into force. Efforts to improve the interface between Health, Social Services & Education remain in their infancy in Wales, despite the best efforts of the WG & the DES (formerly DCELLS) as progress on best practice has remained slow.
- x) Studies of professionals, including education welfare officers, learning school mentors (LSM'), classroom assistants, teachers, middle managers, senior staff & head teachers in England & Wales consistently blame aspects/issues relating to the national curriculum as a prime cause for pupils' non-attendance. A majority of professional staff consider there is too little vocational education on offer for lower ability pupils.
- y) Approximately 25-33% of persistent absentees or truants can be disruptive when in school. A high proportion of teachers are happier when they are not in school. These professional attitudes amongst a minority of teachers may have an impact upon why some schools perform less well than their peers on attendance league tables. It used to be common practice in some parts of the UK for schools to condone absence amongst their most disruptive pupils during the period when school inspections took place. This was made illegal some years ago, although a head teacher lost her job in NE England for continuing this practice, whilst others have been suspended.
- z) Studies indicate that few school governors currently have a grasp of attendance issues. Few school annual reports currently provide much information on school attendance matters. However, most schools & LA's have reasonable policy documents. Some however, can be neglected or are out-of-date. Some schools/LA's update them only immediately prior to an ESTYN inspection.
- aa) The EWS in Wales remain unhappy about the lack of national training programmes available for them despite the research evidence gathered in 2005/2006 & the NBAR Report recommendations, although, it is understood, DES is currently acting upon this issue. Similarly, unlike England, few training opportunities on attendance currently exist in Wales.

TOWARDS NEW SOLUTIONS

This next section will outline some possible new solutions by topic, along with the rationale for each.

## 1) EARLY INTERVENTION

All the available evidence from a range of studies & a key recommendation within the NBAR Report is that there is a need in cases of school attendance to implement much earlier intervention strategies. Similar ideas are now being adopted in England post NBAR. Unfortunately, in Wales, some LA's have made little change or impact here. Why? First, because EWO's are spread too thinly on the ground in some LA's with possible further cut-backs imminent. Traditionally, EWO's are politically weak & are considered 'easy meat' when 'cuts' come around as happened in Wales during the Thatcher era in the 1980's. This is one reason why the EWS is regarded universally as 'the Cinderella Service.' Some LA's currently offer no or almost no support to primary schools except in exceptional & the most serious circumstances. Second, because of political in-fighting & scarcity of resources within LA's, the more powerful head teachers often soak up the available resources for themselves. Most potential legal cases & prosecutions affect parents or carers of secondary-age pupils, especially in years 10 & 11 (when it is much too late). Third, although more LA's in Wales do give some primary schools some EWS support, this is often tokenism or spread too thinly on the ground. The reality remains that in most primary schools it is the head teacher who manages attendance issues; normally without any training for the role. Therefore, attendance & related issues continue to be addressed much too late. Unwittingly, educationalists are often making parents' roles more difficult as well & some parents feel let down by the Service, especially when they are initially unaware of their children's non-attendance. The poor outcomes of non-attendance cases taken to court often fuels annoyance between head teachers & other teaching staff given the amount of paper work involved although, of course the court decision bears no relationship to the EWS service. Indeed, many EWS staff are equally frustrated by the court outcomes themselves.

## 2) LITERACY & NUMERACY

The relationship between literacy & pupils' non-attendance & subsequent lack of educational attainment & academic progress cannot be over-estimated. There is overwhelming research evidence to back the point since the National Children's Bureau longitudinal study commenced in the 1960's. These details were outlined in the NBAR Report, pages 19-21.

Since then, a new & very important longitudinal study conducted in the United States by Greenwood, Kratchowill and Clements (2008), which monitored pupils' progress between grades 3 to 9, reported identical conclusions. The clear fact is that once pupils fall behind in their literacy & numeracy scores, they will continue to fall further & further behind as they progress up the years at school. It is pupils from within this under-performing group who become absentees & truants & often develop behavioural problems & other disorders as well.

It was for this reason that the NBAR Report's (2008, pages 9 & 137) first recommendation was that:

“The Welsh Assembly Government should, through implementing the revised curriculum & assessment arrangements from September 2008 in schools in Wales, provide a clear lead that no child (within the mainstream ability range) should leave primary school without the functional ability to read & write.”

This message was strongly reinforced in both the Minister's Cardiff address when he proposed a new primary-phase literacy test & in the CI's end-of-phase annual Report (ESTYN, 2011). Despite this, and the new all-Wales literacy strategy, it seems there remains some way to go before the NBAR recommendation is fully understood & implemented.

Therefore, I make no apologies for underlying the message once more. Presently, between approx. 30-35% of pupils at 15 years of age are incapable of undertaking the PISA 'test' satisfactorily solely because of their low literacy & numeracy abilities. Even worse, these pupils are unlikely to achieve the Minister's minimum target of five or more GCSE's. Therefore, if the Welsh Nation as a whole wishes to see its international standing in league tables on Educational achievement improve, it has to obtain higher achievement scores from more of these currently underperforming pupils. Put another way, despite obvious impediments, Welsh educationalists cannot afford to sit back & allow the number of its pupils with additional learning needs to continue to rise year upon year, without the downward achievement spiral continuing.

It is realistically possible to do something about it. How? First, throughout the Foundation Phase, the Welsh Government should ensure that all pupils enjoy either individually &/or collectively personal tuition in literacy & numeracy. This should become a fundamental right for pupils & their parents alike. Whenever pupils fall behind their chronological reading & numeracy ages in literacy &/or numeracy, they should be entitled to additional support whether in one-to-one sessions or in 'catch up' classes. There is abundant research evidence from a range of countries that disadvantaged & less competent pupils can catch up with their reading & numeracy scores following periods away from school (whatever the reason whether illness or truancy) given as little as 6 to 10 weeks of intensive help & support. Once this happens, they gain in confidence, their self-esteem is raised & they can fully re-engage in the curriculum & enjoy their learning.

In economic terms, this is also the cheapest possible option in both the short & long-term as the KPMG (2008) Foundation Report on the Long-Term Costs of Literacy Difficulties fully disclosed. These findings reinforced the two NPC Reports (2005a, b) on the costs of truancy & school absenteeism to the nation, whilst the NAO Report (2005) found that over a 20-year period, & despite the plethora of new initiatives & financial incentives available in England, there had been no discernible improvement in school attendance.

The only significant cost to the Welsh economy would come in the form of better training for teachers, classroom assistants & learning school mentors in reading, literacy & numeracy teaching & in providing group & one-to-one support. However, I think it necessary here to express a slight reservation about the calibre of some professionals who undertake this work

presently, although this should be relatively easy to remedy. Indeed, the calibre of some teachers in their own use of English &, in English language in particular, is a perennial concern to many professionals.

### 3) THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATION WELFARE SERVICE

The education welfare service (EWS) was initially established to ensure that pupils of compulsory school age attended school on a regular basis in accordance with the requirements of the 1944 Education Act. In some LA's in England and North Wales, the EWS was renamed the education social work (ESW Service) because, although remaining part of the Education Service within LA's, their training was undertaken through social work qualifications. In recent years, the role of the EWS/ESW Service has become increasingly complicated. The Children Acts of 1989 & 2004, the Education Act of 1996, the Anti-Social Behaviour Act of 2003, amongst several more, have all complicated their role & the Service is no longer solely about non-attendance.

A paper which I published in 2008 in Educational Studies showed how complex & variable the roles & responsibilities of the EWS/ESW Service was in 20 different authorities in England & Wales. In fact, the organisation, structure & specific responsibilities varied in every LA, partly caused by a lack of agreed national norms, terms of reference, salary scales, professionally-agreed responsibilities & local needs & history. Thus, apart from their core attendance roles, the EWS/ESW was given responsibility for a wide range of other legislative or educational provision. These included: being the named exclusion officers; the lead child protection officers; the named anti-social behaviour officer; the officer responsible for licensing & child-age employment, CRB checks, & the named officer for parenting orders. Salaries for principal & senior EWO's could vary by as much as three times between different LA's with salaries generally much lower in most LA's in Wales. Some LA's contained both qualified ESW's & non-qualified EWS, although, interestingly, they usually undertook similar overall responsibilities, despite being paid different salaries. Few staff had degrees & even some principal EWS staff are comparatively unqualified, some having joined the Service after previous careers in for example, the police or armed forces. There is considerable potential to upgrade this Service given employability availability levels. Recently, therefore, some EWS LA services are now beginning to include trained teachers.

Equally, the ratio of EWS staff to total LA school population & the number of secondary schools varies considerably across England & Wales. For example, one smallish LA in England contained 48,000 pupils. It looks after 18 secondary schools. Yet it employed 20 full-time EWS staff at a ratio of 1 to 0.9 per secondary school. A similar-sized LA in Wales with also 48,000 pupils contained 27 secondary schools & only 13 EWS staff at a ratio of one member of staff for every 2.08 secondary schools. In some English LA's, there was more than one EWS staff member per secondary school; some having ratios of 0.51, 0.69, 0.5, 0.41, 0.48. 0.7 per secondary school. Yet, the Welsh LA's ratios were considerably higher with the poorest at 3.5 secondary schools for every EWS employee (& these data excluded altogether their related overall primary school responsibilities which is indicative of both the scale of the problem & there overall potential workloads). One Welsh LA had only four EWS staff for



almost 30,000 pupils with a secondary school attendance average hovering around 90%. The largest &, at the time, lowest - attending Welsh LA, had 26.4 EWS staff. By comparison a high- attendance English LA (rated Grade 1 by OFSTED) with approximately half the number of pupils & 13 fewer secondary schools, employed 50.5 EWS staff; more than twice as many. These differences are hard to comprehend & to justify despite the economic downturn. The corollary is that if the EWS in Wales faces further 'cuts' we should expect non-attendance in schools in Wales to rise unless a different solution is found. In part, present day EWS staffing levels reflects the 'cuts' which took place during the Thatcher era in Wales from which the Service has never fully recovered. It may be one of the factors why primary school non-attendance levels at key stage 2 have risen as it has meant that primary head teachers have often been left to 'sink or swim' by themselves. In fact, a number of primary head teachers now make the home visits formerly conducted by the EWS, otherwise nothing often happens. The same is true in parts of England.

A third perspective on the issue can be found from further evidence in the same paper. LA's with lower rates of EWS staff & those with the highest workloads tended to be found in LA's in England & Wales (particularly) with the poorest overall rates of attendance & the highest levels of unauthorised absence. In this latter respect, some LA's in Wales tended to have rates of unauthorised absence between 2 or 3 times higher than their counterparts in England. Is this purely coincidence? Almost certainly not.

In other papers which I have published on the EWS between 2003 and 2008, it has been possible to show the wide range of differences between EWS/ESW Services in England & Wales in terms of the staff's initial qualifications, CPD activity & longer-term career prospects. These data included work which I undertook with the NFER (Wales) on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government between 2005/2006 &, since then, little appears to have changed much since.

The reality however, is even more complicated. In one sense, the Welsh Government has acted very wisely over a decision which I endorse. It decided, partially upon my advice, to leave the role of the EWS Service unscathed post the Children Act, 2004. Parts of the Education Service in England took a different view. Following the Every Child Matters (2003) agenda, they decided hastily to integrate their children's services & to amalgamate social services with Education in LA reorganisations. The consequences have seen a myriad of different outcomes for former EWS personnel. In Lancashire LA, for example, I was called in to give advice after existing EWS post the Children Act of 2004 were re-engaged as either qualified or unqualified social workers due to staff shortages & the new prevailing English ethos. Thereafter, school attendance worsened considerably in a short period of time. Consequently, in conjunction with senior LA staff, it was necessary to put together a Report which recommended the appointment of a new tier of home-school liaison officers to provide support to schools. Locally, some head teachers at primary, secondary & special school level had become significantly disgruntled to the extent that some were using their own funds to employ attendance officers/attendance support staff/ or to appoint some of their own home/school liaison staff, sometimes at the expense of teaching posts, such was the perceived need & worsening of pupils' attendance levels.

Similar events have occurred in other LA's in England. Part of the original problem may have been the fact that whoever drafted the Children Act, 2004, forgot entirely about the school attendance regulations & the role of the EWS/ESW Service & of LA's in this regard. The challenges brought by the introduction of the Children Act of 2004 & of the move towards greater integration between Health, Social services & Education remain a challenge too, for us in Wales; not least over the management of school attendance. Fortunately, at present, in one very real sense, there remains less confusion & blurring over responsibilities for school attendance in Wales.

It may seem easy therefore, to conclude that by increasing significantly its pool of EWS/ESW staff & by providing better initial & CPD training, Welsh Education could significantly reduce its school attendance problems. But, this aspect remains only one part of a complex phenomenon in which the Service can continue to play a vital part. Another is for LA's to revamp the roles & responsibilities of its existing EWS staff to ensure they have appropriate cover for both primary & special schools as well as for PRU's; some of which receive very little help at present. Without this, early intervention strategies, as well as reintegration strategies (which the NBAR Report found to be very weak to the point of being non-existent in some LA's in Wales), are unlikely to gain the necessary foothold they need.

#### 4) INSIDE SECONDARY SCHOOLS & LA's

##### a) Practical Issues

Most schools in Wales now contain reasonably satisfactory school attendance, behaviour management & anti-bullying policy documents in one shape or form. As with their equivalent LA policy documents, some of these are better than others. There is a case for suggesting that the WG could draft one overarching & all-embracing policy document on each of these issues to cover every school & LA, if only for reasons of consistency as shown by judgements in recent legal cases.

However, the management of school attendance varies by school & LA. So much depends upon personal interest & professional competence. Equally, the EWS varies similarly in Wales on this continuum. This year for example, I have been advising a Welsh LA on its school attendance policy & strategy. With comparatively little difficulty, it has proved possible to raise the LA from the relegation places on school attendance to fighting for the Premiership title. At the start of the project, over 75% of their primary schools were below 91% attendance with many below 90%. Six months later, primary attendance has risen to over 92% with many having risen to 95/96% & higher. Similar improvements have occurred in the secondary sector. How & why has this been achieved?

First, because their new Director of Education was both surprised & disappointed to find the state of school attendance within the LA following his appointment after years of decline & relative neglect by his predecessors. Second, because the EWS was demoralised for a whole variety of different reasons with two members of a small staff off on long-term sickness. Third, because of the lack of a competent figure-head who could take charge & be able to champion the cause. Thereafter, after being called in to help, all the LA & EWS documentation was rewritten & re-launched with primary school head teachers/deputies &

secondary school staff retrained, a new Head of EWS appointed (who is extremely competent & has made a large difference), & governors, social services, police, voluntary service/agency & LA managers also trained.

Whilst this is all positive, there is another side to the equation which is worth recording because it provides another telling insight. The secondary school in the LA with the largest attendance problem initially failed to send anyone to the day CPD event on improving school attendance. After a forcible reminder was sent to the school, a delegate was sent. However, this person was not a member of the school's senior or middle management team. Nor did the head teacher respond personally. In fact, he was a comparatively junior member of staff. Hence, the key NBAR recommendation continues to be ignored inside some schools in Wales. Upon arrival, the individual asked the delegates as he entered the room if they could tell him why he had been selected & whether this signalled the beginning of the end of his career because the head teacher only considered him good enough to take charge of attendance. In fact, the reverse was true. It signalled exactly how the school SMT took their responsibilities for managing school attendance.

Over the years, I could replicate similar stories many times; not least when head teachers or members of SMT's excuse themselves from in-service or CPD-events on attendance, often on the grounds that their staff need the training but they do not! Apparently, this rarely happens on curriculum-led issues. Therefore, there remains an attitudinal problem on the part of some educationalists in Wales over the management of school attendance & it is time for some of these staff to 'get real.'

#### b) School & LA Variations

There is considerable & consistent evidence in the literature of the effects of school differences upon rates of school attendance dating back to the 1970's & the work of David Reynolds & Michael Rutter & others since. So much depends upon the quality of leadership, management styles, school ethos, standards of overall & individual subject teaching, home-school relationships, pupil intake statistics, along with a host of other variables such as a school's location & history, pupils' social class backgrounds & the numbers of children receiving free school meals, amongst a large range of further possible measures. Exactly the same appears to hold true for LA's, whether in Wales or elsewhere.

In a study which I conducted & presented to the NBAR Review Team & which has subsequently been published in the Journal entitled Educational Review in late 2008, teaching staff, EWS, classroom assistants & learning school mentors (LSM'S) gave the following reasons why their pupils chose to miss the schools in which they either taught or supported. These reasons included:

- 1) the effects of other disaffected pupils upon their lessons & learning;
- 2) the lack of vocational courses across the key stages;
- 3) the effects of bullying;
- 4) being behind in classes or school work (especially those with SEN, literacy or numeracy problems);
- 5) poor relationship with teachers & other staff;

- 6) a dislike of particular school subjects;
- 7) poor pastoral care;
- 8) unreliable staff (eg too many staff absences, supply teachers etc);
- 9) pupils' low self-concepts;
- 10) adverse peer pressures;
- 11) pupils who do not feel safe in school or on the way to or from school.

It may be significant that this list excludes boredom which, in my own experience, is the first reason often given by pupils.

Space constraints prevent me from outlining further details here but it may be worth referring to the original article as it provides further evidence on professionals' views on the home & psychological difficulties of absentees, the role which society plays in school absenteeism, local school & community-based issues, the government's role, the nine areas which cause school absenteeism & why & finally, some of the ongoing issues needed to be resolved to improve school attendance.

It is not uncommon for some teachers to blame pupils' non-attendance & truancy upon their home backgrounds & social class. Whilst this is undoubtedly a key factor especially as most absentees & truants do emanate from low social class & defective home backgrounds, we should keep reminding ourselves that most pupils from low social class backgrounds attend school regularly. So do most pupils with little or limited home support or those who emanate from broken or dysfunctional families. Nevertheless, a larger proportion of absentees & truants do originate from backgrounds requiring free school meals or families regarded as living within or close to poverty.

Over the years it has become entirely possible for me to be able to judge schools reasonably accurately on a variety of levels; you can quickly sense the atmosphere & the way staff & pupils communicate with one another. During my time as NBAR Chair, I visited a school in South Wales. There appeared to be no respect between pupils & teachers as manifest by the language used & some of the events that I witnessed. The size of the school has fallen appreciably from the times when I first got to know it over 30 years ago. A few days later I visited Willows High School in an equally difficult area & found a very different scenario. It is self-evident to me that schools which do not treat their pupils &/or parents with respect often have greater behavioural & non-attendance issues than those which do. When interviewed, some pupils will keenly make this point.

## 5) THE LAW

There is something seriously amiss on the law on school attendance as it does not work at a variety of levels & there is scope here for Wales to now change & amend these laws given their recent acquisition of more law-making powers. What are these issues? First, only a very small number of parents or carers are ever taken to court for their children's non-attendance. Those that do often receive little or no punishment or are given derisory sentences or fines (given the amount of time, paperwork & layers of professionals involved in bringing the prosecution in the first place). Second, court proceedings & court outcomes are notoriously ad hoc & vary from case to case, day-to-day, & from one magistrate to another. Some magistrate's clerks continue to give a low priority to non-

attendance cases. The NBAR team were given detailed evidence on this issue by a senior official at an event in Mid-Wales during their evidence-gathering.

My own view is that it is increasingly right to ask whether some pupils, as well as their parents or carers, should accept some of the blame & receive suitable penalties. After all, pupils today are much more mature than when the 1944 Education Act was drafted some 70 years ago. It is also my view that parents need to be personally inconvenienced more if they are to comply fully with the law. Therefore, better use & conditions could be applied to parenting orders. Parenting orders which inconvenienced parents at weekends or in their spare time might have more potential to work effectively & to make them ensure their children attended school regularly thereafter. Indeed, it is not clear to me why currently so few parenting orders are issued by courts.

Similarly, better training for magistrates & magistrate's clerks might help. So might whole or half-day sessions devoted to school absence cases be helpful for continuity purposes. The evidence from research over a sustained period of time is that to date, whatever has been tried to improve the outcomes of proven non-attendance cases, has never been very successful. There is surely a case here to explore & to find better all – Wales solutions.

#### 6) THE ROLE OF THE DES.

The newly-titled DES plays a key role in managing attendance & related issues such as in having oversight for managing pupils' bullying, behaviour & exclusions. It seems to me that the NBAR Report successfully brought the Department 'up to speed' on the issues of behaviour & attendance from an administrative & managerial perspective. It is now time to move onto a new phase. In school attendance terms, this should be prevention & practical intervention. By prevention, I mean attempting to stop school absenteeism in the first place by utilising more & better early intervention strategies or sound re-integration policies. It will however, take more time for me to outline how the DES can utilise practical approaches more effectively. I do think there are several ways this could be achieved but, for the moment, it is not happening. So what can the DES do better?

First, by analysing & utilising and using attendance data more effectively. This would include the analysis of school attendance data by region, LA, phase, gender & individual schools. This means not just receiving the data but challenging it rigorously, by writing a range of summative interim &/or annual reports on it, by analysing data over given time periods (eg comparative analysis every two, three or five years etc), by challenging individual schools, LA's & the sector to improve or to seek reasons why improvement is not happening. Probably, this is a task for the new Performance Standards Unit. These reports should be a key component also of the work & lead provided to & by the School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) Unit. After all, if pupils do not attend school in the first place, standards in schools in Wales will never rise to their optimum levels. Neither for that matter will SEF be an all-embracing enterprise unless it starts from a position of inclusivity, thereby including all pupils within its framework & starting with the promotion of regular school attendance. Up until this point of time I have heard too little from the SEF team about the need to prioritise the raising of school attendance in Wales. I was disappointed not to have been invited to discuss the NBAR issues with key DES officials until the intervention of CT last autumn; over two years later, despite the previous Education Minister's requests to me at the time of publication.

Second, by DES staff emphasising the practical possibilities of improving school attendance & related behaviour in a number of different ways. These possibilities include for example, the utilisation of a range of school attendance & school change strategies such as the TL, SSTG, PSCC or SBS Schemes, the Family Values Scheme, the 5-Step Behaviour Change Scheme, Webster-Stratton, SEAL or the Solihull approach, amongst a range of other possibilities. Schools experiencing real non-attendance difficulties require help in a practical way. Over the last 25 years, it has been my privilege to be involved in helping a range of failing schools & LA's & to turn around the attendance fortunes of their schools & EWS teams. This is never an easy task. Moreover, when improvement occurs, the foot should never be removed from the gas or regression may soon occur as one or two schools have subsequently found. To be entirely successfully implemented, the change strategy requires the whole-hearted agreement of the entire staff otherwise the schemes will not work. This is why sometimes failing schools or schools in special measures can be more receptive as there is a clear end product or goal in sight for all of them. Sometimes coasting schools are the most difficult in this respect.

Third, by providing regular reports on good practice which can be logged on an attendance (& behaviour) DES website as envisaged in the original NBAR Report.

#### 6)ALTERNATIVE & MORE RADICAL APPROACHES

There are a range of more radical & alternative approaches which might be considered. Some of these ideas are completely new. Others have potential but have only limited or no research evidence to support the concept at the present time. Some might include a need for a strong political imperative. But, fundamentally, given the seriousness of the school non-attendance problem in Wales, they may merit consideration even if some of them potentially may not go down well initially with some parts of the educational establishment.

First, an idea generated by the Minister's own presentation in Cardiff. Why not consider giving schools a separate grade on behaviour or attendance or both? This grade could be published & made freely available. Why could Estyn not give a published grade on behaviour & attendance as part of the end product of their inspection framework? After all, they already oversee this aspect as one part of their inspection framework. Why could the new DES Standards Unit & Estyn not collaborate between themselves better & share information on this issue as these data change annually? I would be tempted to throw data on fixed & permanent exclusions into the same mix as well.

Second, why not extend the powers of governing bodies on behaviour & attendance to require a full analytical report to be sent to them on an annual basis by the head teacher at the end of each year? This should be discussed by the full meeting & signed off by them following amendments or follow up action? The Clerk should ensure this is a regular agenda item. This report could also form the basis for one part of the head teacher's performance review? It would certainly help focus minds & provide a much needed impetus for managing school attendance within some institutions.

Third, why not enforce attendance at compulsory parenting classes for all those parents or carers whose children fail to make 90% of attendance or set the bench mark lower initially & gradually raise it say, from 70 to 80%?The timing of these classes could be another interesting discussion point (eg evenings or weekends)?

Fourth, why not prioritise the in-service & CPD budgets to ensure all core pastoral staff are trained in attendance matters & to provide classroom assistants, LSM's & teachers (especially primary & early years & foundation support staff) with adequate help with early intervention strategies, effective literacy & numeracy approaches, including the best ways to implement one-to-one & small group work?

Fifth, & this is a radical idea, but it could be a real winner, especially with parents or carers & pupils unhappy or disaffected within their existing schools. Why not introduce new legislation to give parents or carers an opportunity to change schools at the end of year nine before they start their GCSE's? If parents are happy with their children's progress & the pupils themselves are also content & happy (especially as their friends will be there), they will not wish to change schools. But, if they opt to do so, they will be given a fresh start. Personally, I think this could be a vote winner, unique to Wales, & do as much to raise standards & improve attendance as any other single measure. But, it may not be universally popular in some quarters!

Sixth, and this is an idea which I first proposed near the start of Jane Davidson's term as Minister, why not establish 'second chance' schools in Wales, especially in the urban conurbations? There are several types of alternative or second chance schools. Sefton, for example, provides specialist schools for pupils who are unhappy in their original school. These might include pupils who are able but being bullied. Or, for pupils who are particularly gifted in creative subjects but may not fit in well in a typical secondary school. OfSTED has commended Sefton for its approach in alternative education in which it offers a range of provision. Conwy is perhaps the only LA in Wales to follow similar approaches, albeit in a different format.

Leeds provides second chance opportunities/schools for pupils who leave school at 16 with minimal qualifications. They are supported for a further two years if they wish to re-enter education. The second chance centres are located in former schools. As Leeds has a serious falling school population & is closing annually a number of schools, finding the facilities is not a problem. The original second chance schools were funded from European sources & would be ideal for the SE Wales & Valleys areas like Newport, Swansea or Cardiff; all of which have current serious non-attendance problems. These centres are staffed by a mixture of teachers & skills experts & provide career opportunities in specialist areas as well as help in vocational & traditional subjects. The evaluations of these schemes showed that a high proportion of pupils who had failed at school the first time around subsequently were successful at entering & achieving well in FE or HE. Some pupils chose a mixture of subjects in the centres; others specialised. They would provide a real alternative & opportunities for potential or actual NEETS.

Seventh, why not make a change in the law in Wales to make it possible for pupils aged 14 to 16 to be allowed to attend FE colleges where they would more readily be able to follow vocational options? I believe this could prove a very popular option for a certain cross section of pupils & would be welcomed by FE staff that would rise to the challenge. Again, it might help to raise both attendance & standards.

Finally, why not make some fundamental changes to ITT to enable staff to become specialists in working with less able & difficult pupils. These teachers could be prepared & encouraged to develop specialist skills. After all, this is what I did after my first year in a secondary modern school & in my subsequent years in a large comprehensive. The experience gained in being put in charge of learning

for a large group of less able, underachieving pupils & 120 disaffected pupils located in a peculiarly-named off/on site unit enriched me both as a person & professional & the lessons which I learnt have stayed with me throughout my career ( as, by now, you should have discovered!).

## CONCLUSION

I very much hope that you, Minister & CT will find considerable merit in this Updated NBAR Report focussing on school attendance, which you requested. I believe this Report contains a very real basis for raising levels of school attendance in Wales at both the primary & secondary stages. I look forward to discussing the issues further with you in the near future about how this may be achieved.

APPENDIX 1: COPY OF A FORTHCOMING PAPER TO BE PUBLISHED IN A MAJOR INTERNATIONAL REFEREED JOURNAL IN THE NEAR FUTURE, previously written & accepted for publication in late 2010, prior to new NBAR UPDATE REPORT being requested by the MINISTER. This paper provides some additional evidential information in support of the content provided in the NBAR UPDATE REPORT.

This paper has since been published In Education Review, 64, 2, 196-211.

THE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF TRUANCY and SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM: FINDING SOLUTIONS FROM A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

KEN REID

## ABSTRACT

This paper has been written specifically from two perspectives. First, because of the research and professional activity carried out by the author in the field for over forty years. Second, as a consequence of the author chairing the National Behaviour & Attendance Review (NBAR) in Wales and writing the subsequent Report (NBAR, 2008), as well as being involved in subsequent follow up activities. Given this unique expertise, it seemed appropriate to reflect upon how school attendance rates could be improved and truancy reduced. In order to achieve this task the author first reflects on key issues in the published data before considering the implications from a strategic and managerial perspective. Finally, a short action plan is presented which could be followed by national governments or local authorities alike, whilst the fundamental principles are relevant to both teachers and schools as well as pointing the way forward for future research.

## KEY WORDS

Truancy, School Absenteeism, Persistent school absenteeism, Management, Strategic Management



## INTRODUCTION

This paper has been written from two complimentary perspectives. First, as a result of the authors research and professional activity in the field which, to date, has lasted for over forty years. Second, as a consequence of the author chairing the processes involved in the National Behaviour and Attendance Review in Wales which took place between 2006-2008, as well as involvement in subsequent follow up activities (NBAR, 2007; 2008; WAG,2009; Reid,2011a,b).Historically, South Wales has always had higher & disproportionate rates of truancy and non-attendance than the rest of the United Kingdom (UK) (Reid, 2004a); a position which continues even now. Given this unique expertise, it seemed appropriate to reflect upon how school attendance rates could be improved and truancy reduced. Therefore, in order to complete this task, the writer first reflects on some of the most significant features in the published literature before considering the implications from both a strategic and managerial perspective. Towards the end of the paper, a short action plan is presented which could be usefully analysed, followed & implemented by national governments and/or local authorities (LA's) alike. The fundamental principles are also relevant for head teachers, teachers and other professional groups as well helping to point the way forward for future research. It should be noted that England, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland are following increasingly different policies and strategies to combat pupils' non-attendance and truancy since the advent of devolution (Reid,2010b).

## BACKGROUND & SIGNIFICANT CLUES

### A) Home Backgrounds & Schools

Who are school absentees & truants & where do they come from? Research has consistently shown that the majority of school absentees & truants emanate from deprived working class and social class backgrounds (Tyerman, 1968; Reid, 1985; 1999).The vast majority of pupils from these backgrounds attend school normally and regularly so, at best, this is only one factor. Reid measured a group of 128 persistent school absentees with two control groups. The first control group was matched for gender, background and nearest birth date but were excellent attendees. The second control group were matched similarly but were academic high fliers. The results showed that there were several significant and statistically significant social, psychological and institutional differences between the three groups (Reid, 1982a; b; 1983a;b; 1984a).As similar work has never been replicated, it is worth reiterating some of these key findings, although some of those being highlighted may not be the most obvious ones in some people's eyes.

First, whilst the persistent absentees made allowances for the behaviour and negative attitude of their parents towards schools and teachers as measured by the use of specially constructed repertory grids (Reid, 1983d) they made no such allowances for some of their teachers which begs the question why not? The answer, but in my judgement only part of the answer, lies in natural family loyalty ties as well as because some teachers seem less well inclined to interact well with certain types of pupils and may even lower their threshold standards accordingly (Reid,1986). Teaching disaffected & challenging pupils is never easy (Reid, 2010a).

### B) Self-concepts, Literacy & Numeracy

Second, & to me perhaps the key finding, the persistent school absentees had statistically lower academic self-concepts & general levels of self-esteem than their counterparts. Therefore, an obvious corollary. If you wish to improve school attendance, you may first have to raise the self-esteem levels of certain groups of vulnerable pupils. This may not be an easy task given teachers' busy lives. It is however, absolutely essential. Let me elaborate upon this point further. The NBAR Report (2008, pages 18-21) reiterated the earlier work of the National Children's Bureau (NCB) Cohort studies ( eg Davie et al, 1972) which found that pupils like school absentees and truants emanated from pupils with literacy and numeracy levels well below their chronological ages, with this gap continuing to increase with age. Teaching pupils to catch up with their literacy and numeracy performance levels is also not easy and it is costly & time consuming (KPMG, 2008). Nevertheless, it is fundamental to raising pupils' self-esteem and therefore, to raising school attendance and decreasing truancy. Sadly, despite my findings over the years, politicians and policy makers alike continue to ignore the importance of this result as well as its implications (Reid, 1982c). Given declining literacy levels amongst some key groups, schools currently have no shortage of clients in this category at both primary and secondary levels (Reid, 2011a); a position which is becoming acute increasingly in Wales (Reid, 2011b).

Greenwood, Kratochwill and Clements (2008, page 10) argue the failure to learn to read is an impairment of ability that severely restricts competence because reading is a keystone necessity for all future success. Estimates suggest that 74% of poor readers in the Third Grade remain poor readers in the Ninth Grade and are more likely to drop out of school, engage in criminal activity and substance abuse (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 2001) whilst children and adults who cannot read are unable to address their health needs which is a wider personal, educational, economic and public health problem. Greenwood et al (2008, page 15) suggest their three-tiered model of prevention is predicated upon the research which shows that reading and behaviour problems after the Third Grade affect increasingly pupils' ability to learn and comprehend subject matter which, in turn, can lead to delinquency, early parenthood, drug use and other high risk behaviours (Reid and Eddy, 1997). Similarly, Chard and Kameenui (2000) note that 75% of the prison population in the USA are poor readers. These studies confirm the early longitudinal work undertaken by the National Children Bureau researchers who followed a cohort of pupils born in 1958 through school and into adulthood (Davie et al, 1972; Fogelman, 1976; NBAR, 2008, pages 19-21).

The University of Bristol Study (2010) for The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found similar results. Young people are more likely to do well at GCSE if the young person him/herself: has greater belief in his/her own ability at school; believes that events result primarily from his/her own behaviours and actions; finds school worthwhile; thinks it is likely he/she will apply to, and get into, higher education; avoids risky behaviour such as frequent smoking, cannabis use, anti-social behaviour, truancy, suspension and exclusion; and does not experience bullying.

### C) Changes in Truancy & School Absenteeism in Recent Years

Third, the types of truants and truancy have changed significantly over the last thirty forty years. Truancy used to be a largely male phenomenon ( Tyerman, 1968). Today, a slight majority of girls predominate in England, Scotland & Wales (Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson & Kirk, 2003). Boy truants however, still undertake around six times more serious criminal offences than girls (Smith, 2004). There has been a growth in group truancy; much of it pre-meditated ( Reid, 2002 a), a rise in

gangs & girl gangs (2008a) & within & out-of-school bullying appears to be related increasingly to truancy & non-attendance ( Darmody, Smyth & McCoy, 2008; McCluskey et al, 2008; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008; Gastic, 2008). Whereas around one in four or five boys could be classified as a disruptive truant ( Reid, 1984b), today we have a rise in disaffected youngsters both boys & girls (Reid, 1985; 1986; 2008a). Recent changes for the causes of school absenteeism and the reasons given by pupils to justify their non-attendance and truancy include cyber bullying, boredom, the growth of ADHD & related syndromes including mental health disorders (Reid, 2008a), and, interestingly, from a professional perspective, perceived failings in the National Curriculum (NC); not least the lack of vocational opportunities ( Malcolm et al 2003; Reid, 2005b; 2005d; 2006c; 2007a; 2007b). Not all pupils are likely to become potential academics and the limited subject choice in the NC is often considered to be a handicap for less able and lower ability pupils.

Perhaps most worrying, is the growth of school absenteeism and truancy amongst younger-aged pupils, most notably at key stage 2 ( 8 to 11 years-old). Around 35/36% of all school absentees now begin their histories of non-attendance at primary school which compares seriously unfavourably with research into school attendance some thirty, forty and fifty years ago when truancy from primary schools was a comparatively rare phenomenon ( Tyerman, 1968; Reid, 1985). Some people have attributed this to the earlier maturational processes of children today; others to feckless and incompetent parenting skills or the growth of single parent families or even adult illiteracy (Reid, 1999). What is of concern is that more younger-aged pupils are getting involved with serious behavioural problems outside school or have become victims of bullying (Reid, 2008a). Therefore, all the available research evidence points toward the need for much earlier intervention.

#### D) The Need for Earlier Intervention

Fourth, & as a variety of reports for LA's indicate, most interventions with truants take place much too late ( Reid, 2004c; 2005e; 2006c). Typically, research evidence suggest that potential early interventions are six times more likely to be successful than those after pupils' non-attendance has reached the persistent stage (Reid, 2002a). Equally, whilst there is normally one initial reason (sometimes referred to as 'the trigger point' ) for the pupils' non-attendance ( whether social, psychological or institutional ), by the time pupils' absences have reached the persistent stage, there are at least several more reasons used to justify the action. In my experience, the psychological processes of retroactive inhibition & cognitive dissonance are at work inside the minds of pupils to justify their behaviour; whether they realise it or not! Often the combination of these reasons are much more serious to overcome, especially after boys and girls reach adolescence, and during key stages 3 and 4 at school (Reid, 1983c). Similar points are made by Graham Allen, MP and the Rt Hon Iain Duncan Smith in their Report entitled good Parents, Great Kids, Better Citizens (Allen and Smith, 2008).

#### E) School and LA Organisation and Intervention Strategies

Fifth, and once again, these phenomena are compounded by the existing organisation of schools and local authorities and their inability to relate to and resolve the needs of individual pupils. Let me give you but two, of many, potential examples. The position has been made worse in some LA's in England (and to a lesser extent in Wales) since the introduction of the Every Child Matters agenda

(Reid, 2005a). Why? First, because there is a chronic shortage of education welfare officers/education social workers (EWO's) in some LA's in the United Kingdom (UK), particularly in Wales where levels and caseloads per individual EWO can be up to four times higher than in England (Reid, 2008c). Whereas EWO's only used to have responsibility for managing non-attendance as outlined under the 1944 Education Act, in the last twenty years, with burgeoning legislation, their roles have increased expeditiously. Despite this, the precise roles of EWO's tend to vary from one LA to another (Reid, 2004c; 2005e; 2006e; Reid et al 2007; 2008). Moreover, some primary head teachers have little or no support from EWO's. Therefore, pupils' initial social, home, psychological, learning or school-based problems often lie undetected and their unhappiness ferments and grows. 'Treatments', if that is the right word, are often punitive rather than therapeutic, especially for parents and carers. These negative processes (although legally justified) tend often to only exacerbate the position, although, increasingly, much better and more professional intervention strategies are beginning to take place.

In some parts of the UK, the move towards the integration of health, education & social services, whilst possibly theoretically sound, has added to significant communication challenges on the ground, especially with case work involving children & their families. In fact, in some LA's, EWO's act as auxiliary social workers because finding suitably-qualified social workers in some parts of the UK, especially in certain larger conurbations, is never easy and there are frequent turnovers of staff which means that parents, carers or absentees and truants often do not receive regular support from the same caseworker in a similarly consistent manner. This is a cause of concern and irritation for many parents and carers (NBAR, 2008a,b). Often it is these frustrating professional shortages of either EWO's or social workers which have forced schools to appoint their own attendance officers/secretaries or specialist classroom assistants or learning school mentors to deal with their own attendance issues (Reid, 2010d).

Similarly, the move towards more school-based EWO support has meant that many secondary heads have much less EWO support than was formerly the case, whilst the 'Cinderella' EWO Service (which took the full brunt of the 'cuts' in the early 1980's) seems to be facing the same challenges again. The lack of available EWO support is a constant grouse amongst the teaching profession throughout the UK (Reid, 2004a; 2006a; 2006b; 2006c; 2007a; 2007b) as is their poor training, qualification and staff development opportunities (Reid et al, 2007; 2008). In turn, these professional shortages are frequently compounded by the chronic lack of availability and numbers of educational psychologists in some parts of the UK. Each school and LA tends to organise its support for pupils' non-attendance differently depending upon their specific circumstances (Reid, 2004c; 2005c; 2006e; Reid et al, 2007, 2008).

Equally, despite national guidelines and school attendance policy documents (Reid, 2000), some schools, rather like teachers and LA's, are rather better at managing school attendance than others (Malcolm et al, 2003; Reid, 2005b; c; 2006d; 2007c; d). Some schools and LA's utilise strategic management and monitoring strategies such as the TL, PSCC, SSTG or other schemes (Reid, 2003a;b; 2004b; 2007e), or variants of them whilst others choose not to do so. Increasingly, some schools are utilising wider embracing community-based or family-based schemes (eg the Family Values Scheme, Ellis, Morgan & Reid, 2012) or after-school or out-of-school clubs (Reid, 2003c). There is currently more and better practice taking place within schools and LA's than ever before but as the NAO (2005) & NPC (2005a; b) Reports remind us, pupils' non-attendance and truancy is stubbornly

difficult to reduce, despite the huge increase in resources and initiatives which have taken place in England since the advent of the Blair Labour Government/Administration in 1997( Reid,2002a).

#### F) Further Research Evidence

Sixth, some additional research evidence is worth considering. These studies include the sponsored research projects undertaken by:

a) Morris and Rutt (2004) who found that a small percentage of persistent absentees seriously undermined some schools overall rates of non-attendance and unauthorised absence.

b) Dalziel and Henthorne (2005)who showed that the attitudes towards schools and teachers of a minority of parents & carers of school absentees was markedly worse and poorer than the general parent population (NB We need to remember that some pupils are truants of third and fourth-generational 'truancy families').

c) Croll and Moses (2005) who explored the different value systems of different kinds of pupils including truants. It may well be that future research will be able to identify further personality or psychological processes which affect the thinking of pupils like truants and absentees, especially as we know that both boy and girl persistent absentees share much in common such as lower self-esteem (Reid, 1985).

d) O'Keefe et al (1993) who found that specific lesson absence (often excluded from normal national and local statistics on school attendance ) was the highest form of non-attendance/truancy (depending upon your definition and perspective) in some schools and LA's, although this is an often under discussed issue in the literature. This is one of several reasons why official statistics on pupils' non-attendance should be treated with scepticism. Others include the fact that it is difficult for teachers and schools to provide accurate unauthorised absence returns given that these often rely upon secondary information/letters/notes from parents whilst the policy in some schools more than others is to rigorously record pupils' unauthorised absences. By contrast other schools do everything possible to minimise their true unauthorised absence rates, sometimes encouraged by LA staff.

#### THE IMPLICATIONS & GUIDING PRINCIPLES

For the purposes of the rest of this paper, we shall assume an ideal world. Hence, no account will be taken of 'cuts' or other economic woes. The assumption will be that the needs of vulnerable children should come first and should be a key priority for any advanced caring society. This is not being naive. Rather, it is a recognition that if you wish to find solutions, there may be a cost factor. As the NAO Report (2005) indicated, the consequences of doing nothing will eventually cost the tax payer more in the long-term.

The key principles behind these ideas are:

- 1) to enable all pupils to achieve success;
- 2) to facilitate and raise the self-esteem of vulnerable pupils;
- 3) to enable all pupils and parents to value schooling and their own learning & achievement;
- 4) to focus upon early intervention;
- 5) to ensure that all professionals are properly trained for their tasks;

- 6) to complement existing national and local school improvement and effectiveness strategies alongside individual professional and school development plans;
- 7) to make parents and/or carers part of the overall planning team for their children's schooling and to ensure they accept ownership for their responsibilities;
- 8) To place improved literacy and numeracy at the centre of the proposals.

### Prospective Action Plan

In order to combat and reduce school absenteeism and truancy, the following actions and interventions would need to be undertaken at both a national strategic level and at local levels. These are:

- a) Ensure that all pupils can enjoy and achieve success. Too many pupils like truants fall behind in their levels of academic success very early during their learning often because of inadequate literacy and numeracy competencies. Therefore, it is essential to enable these pupils to catch up as expeditiously as possible using such interventions as one-to-one strategies involving for example, classroom assistants or learning school mentors (LSM's). These latter staff should be appropriately trained in the best literacy, numeracy & pupil support interventions. Frequently they are not. In fact, some have had little or no training whatsoever apart from the normal induction processes. Moreover, some have few English language or use of English skills and this is surely fundamental.
- b) Thereafter, each of these 'at risk' pupils should be monitored and follow individual support plans as envisaged in the Every Child Matters agenda. In some LA's, this is also still not occurring. Schools should use early intervention strategies, particularly so they can intercede at the point of initial absence in order to overcome the drift towards the more persistent phase. Currently, this is precisely what is not happening in far too many schools partly because of the culture/history of the school and the large number of pupils involved in school absenteeism as well as the high workloads and additional pressures upon staff. However, at least in both theory & practice all these kinds of activities should help to raise pupils' self-esteem.
- c) In order to facilitate a) and b) above, some specialist EWS liaison work inside schools, especially within primary schools, should be taking place to identify vulnerable pupils and to undertake needs and/or risk assessments, which might for some categories of pupils , involve making home visits at the earliest possible opportunity. Unfortunately, the current state and shortages of EWO's is militating against this happening successfully. Moreover, the embryonic nature of improving and creating a better interaction between health, social services and educational services is often hampering efforts on the ground. Therefore, either more and better qualified EWO staff will need to be appointed or some alternative 'Attendance Officer' posts created, perhaps under the control of head teachers. This need is especially critical at primary school level (particularly at key stage 2 ) and in the early years of secondary schooling. Whilst there will be a cost factor, both the short-term gains in educational performance and in school attendance, alongside the long-term societal gains, should make the additional costs a shrewd investment.
- d) More effective work needs to be undertaken to combat bullying in schools (Reid, 1989c,d) including cyber bullying. The consequences of cyber bullying are only just beginning to be

understood and this is an area where further research is urgently needed. Nevertheless, the indications are that on-site & external bullying, along with cyber bullying, are two of the main reasons for local increases in non-attendance in some schools (Reid, 2008b). The reasons for school exclusions & the role of pupil referral units (PRU's) are other fields which require further research (Daniels et al, 2003; Reid, 2009a).

- e) There needs to be better analysis of local and national school attendance data to detect trends, patterns and in-school weaknesses. For example, why do some pupils skip certain lessons and days and not others (Reid, 2009b; c; 2010a; b; c)? These local and national patterns should be discussed at local head teacher forums and in national strategy conferences. Comparative analysis reports between schools (at both national or local levels) could be especially effective in this regard; not least as part of national or local school improvement or school effectiveness or school improvement initiatives. In extreme circumstances, closing schools with very high rates of non-attendance might be an option.
- f) There needs to be a major re-think about the concept of punishing parent/s or carer/s for their children's non-attendance. Existing punishments are notoriously ineffective (Zhang, 2004). Governments should consider or pursue one of two possible routes or even both in a complementary manner. First, by ensuring that inadequacies on the part of parents result in them either losing part of their free time (eg at weekends in undertaking community service) or by ensuring they attend compulsory parenting classes. In my experience, parents of truants hate being inconvenienced more than anything else, especially if it coincides with their valuable free time. This sanction would be far more effective and enforceable than fines. Second, the introduction of such projects as the Family Values Scheme (Ellis, Morgan & Reid, 2012) is another potential route, alongside perhaps, the 'Incredible Years' (Webster-Stratton, 2006) or other approaches.
- g) Another potential area to explore is through implementing more innovative out-of-school programmes (Reid, 2003c) or better in-school initiatives which broaden pupils' experiences and provide them with rich experiences they might otherwise never enjoy. Research already indicates that some less able and working class pupils attend school regularly for 'compensatory' reasons. These include meeting friends & participating in school clubs and societies, such as sport, music and drama (Reid, 1985).
- h) Research also suggests that some potential or actual pupils benefit from reduced timetables which focus on the basics (literacy & numeracy) and, in secondary schools, upon vocational routes. Following certain lessons may be counter-productive, however desirable and is a key factor in specific-day absence. Explicitly, some girls will do anything to miss physical education when swimming is involved. Better learning pathways between secondary schools and further education (FE) colleges would be of benefit here and, in the long-term, prove to be a cheaper option.
- i) School and LA staff, including EWO's (Reid, 2006b) need much better training in managing school attendance, especially in Wales where no national training schemes currently exist (NBAR, 2007; 2008; Reid, 2011c; d; e), although this is a general problem throughout the United Kingdom (UK). Perhaps surprisingly, managing school attendance is a weakness of many existing head teachers (Reid, 2007a). As so many truants skip school because of their own or others behaviour in the classroom, better behavioural management training at a whole variety of levels is another prime requisite (NBAR, 2007; 2008). Schemes such as the

5-Stop Behaviour Programme could be helpful in this regard (Morgan, Ellis & Reid, 2012), especially with disruptive absentees (Reid, 1984c; 1989a,b).

- j) Another possible route which has not yet been tried before is to grade schools on their competence of managing school attendance and possibly, behaviour, especially given the disparity on this issue in school inspection reports (Reid, 2005b; c; 2006d; 2007c;d ).This would certainly provide incentives to head teachers, senior managers and schools , more especially if it was included as part of a school profile which was published. Programmes on managing school attendance (and bullying & challenging behaviour) should become an essential element of training programmes for school leadership and headship. New teachers and those in their early professional development need better training on implementing successful intervention strategies with pupils.
- k) Finally, further research to explore pupils' views about their own attendance and behaviour is another fruitful avenue for research (Reid et al ,2010a;b) as are restorative justice schemes within schools (McCluskey et al, 2008). Both of these outlets could potentially be used to help pupils to accept more responsibility for their own actions.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although some of these ideas are not entirely new, they have never previously been put together as part of a single programme. This all-embracing programme could be introduced as part of a strategic initiative at a national level and facilitated by complementary approaches at an LA and school level. It is suggested that policy makers and politicians should adopt and implement this strategic programme, alongside the related planning & training programmes. If undertaken, the author is confident it will help to raise rates of school attendance and reduce truancy in a comparatively short timescale. The real search for solutions to pupils' non-attendance and truancy (Reid, 2011f) needs to start in earnest. Further and more innovative research in this field is not only urgently needed but overdue. It would make sense for this innovative research to utilise the ideas outlined in this paper. Rather than attempting to find political solutions to the problem, it may be better to start focussing upon the learning needs of all pupils, more especially those from deprived backgrounds, with poor parental support, literacy and numeracy problems in their early school years, with low self-esteem and related familial, social, psychological and in-school problems. The earlier these issues are identified, the more likely the intervention is to be successful. At present, far too many interventions with pupils like absentees and truants occur far too late in their school careers.

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