

PAPER 2: THE NBAR REVIEW: SOME REFLECTIONS

The purpose of this paper is to briefly outline some important milestones in the management of behaviour and attendance since devolution in 1999.

THE PRE-NBAR PERIOD

Prior to devolution when responsibility for both behaviour and attendance resided in London, the management of both behaviour and school attendance in Wales were largely neglected and ignored fields in both research exercises and official reports undertaken in England.

Following concerns about the high rates of school absenteeism and unauthorised absence in Wales, and specific concerns made by both ESTYN and the then Chief Inspector for Schools in Wales, The Education Minister (JD) decided to hold a review of school attendance arrangements in Wales. This was an exercise led at the time by an official from within DCELLS (see: Welsh Assembly (2003a) The Attendance Task and Finish Group, Final Report, Cardiff, National Assembly for Wales; and, Welsh Assembly (2003b) The Attendance Task and Finish Group, Provisional Action Plan, Cardiff, National Assembly for Wales).

Despite some initial enthusiasm, the overall outcome was disappointing and most of the recommendations were never properly implemented (see: Reid, K (2004) Combating truancy and school absenteeism in Wales: The latest developments, Welsh Journal of Education, 12, 2, 13-34).

Not long afterwards, the Minister created a series of Ministerial Advisory Groups (MAG's). I represented behaviour and attendance on the Special/Additional Learning Needs Group and chaired the Behaviour and Attendance Sub-Group. This undertook a lot of excellent work on a range of issues and was, in my opinion, the best and most useful Group on which I was ever involved in as part of DCELLS operations. It contained a considerable number of capable and high ranking practitioners. These came from senior positions within Health, Social services, Education, the voluntary sector, LA's and ESTYN and was an excellent multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary sounding board/advisory team which did much significant work. In this capacity, I liaised with the Minister on certain issues on a few occasions.

Unfortunately, it was decided to disband the MAG Groups around 2007. However, for a short period, the work of the ADLN Group continued on its own due to its perceived importance. Then, whilst in the middle of an important exercise and in mid-meeting, we were all told that our MAG Group would cease and our Group and input sadly, disappeared.

THE NBAR REVIEW PROCESS

However, during the life of the MAG, and the following interregnum, and after further concerns about both behaviour and especially, school attendance, were raised by ESTYN and through some unfavourable media publicity, it was decided to establish the National Behaviour and Attendance Review (NBAR) which I was asked to Chair; initially by JD and subsequently, continued with JH. The work took place over a 20-month period between 2006 and 2008 and, despite considerable pressure, both the Interim Report (2007) and Final Reports were completed on time.

This was not an easy task. The methodology utilised was both thorough and time consuming employing the use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches, including gathering some original data and a world first in incorporating children's views into the evidence obtained.

It was therefore, decided to sub-divide the NBAR work into two distinct phases. In phase one, which lasted for the first six months, the views and specific needs of all types of staff engaged in behaviour and attendance work were sought and obtained throughout and across Wales. The data obtained from these exercises were analysed and presented in the detailed Interim Report.

At this juncture, an important development occurred. The Minister (JH) sent for me (along with AL) and advised me that my key administrator (Anna Thomas, who was excellent) was leaving DCELLS to take up a new role within local government. Due to staff shortages within DCELLS, she asked me to give full priority to the role and to self-manage the whole process and to give generously of my time. She wrote to the Chairman of my Board of Governors for his consent which he gladly gave. The Minister's wishes were achieved as I attended and chaired every meeting at every event, irrespective of task. Therefore, much of the major administrative tasks fell upon my PA at the time Angela Harris, who unselfishly gave up a lot of her free time, including working in the evenings and weekends without any additional payment. Therefore, I applied myself as diligently as possible to my combined roles as Chair of NBAR and Deputy Vice Chancellor of Swansea Metropolitan University.

Stage Two of the NBAR work was sub-divided into a number of specific areas. These were on:

- a) Attendance;
- b) Behaviour;
- c) Exclusion;
- d) Participation; and,
- e) Training.

A number of empirical tasks were also undertaken and analysed in such fields as:

- 1) The voice of children and young people (see papers published in Education Review and Educational Studies in attached cv);
- 2) Parents;
- 3) A range of core issues;
- 4) Recent research within the UK in the field.

The recommendations emanating from all this work formed the basis for the nineteen core recommendations and seventy three supporting ones.

POST NBAR DEVELOPMENTS.

Approximately, twelve months after the NBAR (2008) Report was published, DCELLS and the Minister (JH) published their response to the findings which had the full cross-party support of the Welsh Assembly Government. This Report was entitled: Behaving and Attending: Action Plan Responding to the National Behaviour and Attendance Review Welsh Government, 2009: (Information Document 076/2009).

It was an excellent document overseen by an Implementation Group, of which I was part and to which I gave my full support (see Paper 1). Work started thereafter on progressing the issues satisfactorily. Unexpectedly, however, in December 2009, the person with designated responsibility for implementing these recommendations, left to take up a new role with the WJEC.

Subsequently, events changed. A new group was formed and called to its one and only meeting a year or so later. To my surprise, following some internal reorganisation within DCELLS, some new staff were appointed to the Section and these were introduced to the meeting, along with a new Head of Department. Naturally, I assumed we would continue the process from where we had left off with *Behaving and Attending*; not least because much of the focus of the previous meeting had been on the special document on meeting staff training needs which was presented in Annex B (pages 38 to 48) which had rightly been emphasised by the Minister (JH) in both my pre-meeting with her and in the associated press release and interviews afterwards, including interviews given on national television. So, professional expectations were raised.

However, despite my questioning at the meeting, I was advised that the NBAR agenda “had changed and moved on” and I received no reply to my question about the status of the training document. It was as if it had never happened (see Paper 1).

It soon became clear that DCELLS had re-prioritised the various elements within the NBAR Report and taken a number of new decisions, including issuing contracts for some pilot projects. This came as news to me. Incidentally, this second group was never to meet again and I never again attended any further Implementation Group meetings. Therefore, much of the original good work outlined in *Behaving and Attending* remained dormant; a position which has only partially changed since.

After that my role changed and was largely ignored. However, in April and May, 2010, following some helpful discussions between myself and CT, two new meetings were held with the then new Minister (LA) following serious criticisms in the press and media about the slow implementation of the NBAR Report’s recommendations from a number of notable sources including the Children’s Commissioner’s Office. During the meeting, the Minister asked me to write a quick update for him focussing upon attendance. This was achieved and he received the Report at the end of May, 2010. This was entitled: *Update on National Behaviour and Attendance Report (NBAR): Improving School Attendance in Wales* and is presented as Paper 3 in my series to you.

The paper focussed upon school attendance in Wales from a variety of perspectives. These included:

- a) The causes of non-attendance and truancy;
- b) Towards new solutions;
- c) Early intervention;
- d) Literacy and numeracy;
- e) The role of the education welfare service;
- f) Inside Secondary schools and LA’s, including school and LA variations;
- g) The law;
- h) The role of the DfES in Wales; and,
- i) Some alternative and more radical approaches.

When the Minister (LA) saw me to discuss the paper, he seemed very pleased with it. He had certainly done his homework and I was impressed with his knowledge. In fact, at this point, perhaps I should add in parenthesis, that the interest and support from all three Ministers has been excellent and appreciated. In fact, the Minister (LA) instructed the DfES to re-engage me with the NBAR work. Shortly afterwards, a meeting took place within the DfES under the Chairmanship of a Deputy Director and the person i/c behaviour and attendance. It was an amicable meeting attended by some of his colleagues. It was agreed at the time and at their suggestion, that I would be called into the Department on a periodical basis for advisory discussions and updating. This was approx two and a half years ago. Subsequently, this has never happened; not even once. I do not know why.

Since then, in a key speech at Cardiff University, the Minister praised me for my efforts on NBAR and publically stated there was to be a renewed initiative and re-examination of NBAR as one of his twenty key points, as part of the process to raise standards and performance in schools and LA's in Wales. He indicated that I would be re-involved. However, with only one exception, I have not been asked to attend any new or follow up meetings and am now largely out-of-the-loop.

The exception was a meeting and request from Ruth Conway who had recently taken over as the person i/c Behaviour and Attendance within the DfES (who I was impressed by and who is now reporting directly to MW). She asked me to undertake some short-term work with Cardiff LA which was completed during the Spring, 2012. I did receive a request to act as part of an Action Group going into Blaenau Gwent to help with their retrieval work, to which I willingly agreed, but, subsequently, never heard any more. Apart from my assessment work of materials for the new interactive Master's degree in the fields of behaviour and attendance and special and additional learning needs, it is perhaps ironical, therefore, that my most recent involvements have been in Ireland, England and Scotland on a range of interventions (some written up in my two new forthcoming books), and with the Obama Government as part of two new meta-analyses, as well as continuing with my writing of books, research articles and Editorial work (see attached CV). I have, for example, become the Editor of the new weekly on-line publication entitled the Welsh Education Journal.

CONCLUSION

Looking back on my experiences of NBAR, I would respectfully like to make the following considered points to the Committee.

First, it was a great opportunity and experience with an interesting and diverse Review Team.

Second, I believe the main benefit of the NBAR Report was to bring Wales up-to -speed in the two fields. Wales had been rather sluggish in its management of this area over the first ten years of devolution, partly due to staff shortages, conflicting pressures and for other reasons. My assertion is manifest by the fact that subsequent reports (eg the Taylor Review Report in England) have reiterated many of the same key points as those found in NBAR, such as the requirement for much better and earlier intervention.

Third, the speed of implementation, after a promising start, has been a major disappointment to me; not least with some of the core recommendations on for example, the need for new national training programmes on behaviour and attendance at a variety of levels.

Fourth, the initial advantage which the Welsh Government benefitted from through the NBAR process has once again been lost. Having been presented with a national and international lead in the field (see all the NBAR articles published in leading journals), NBAR should have been central to the school effectiveness and standards-raising exercises in recent times, to literacy, numeracy and early intervention initiatives and training and professional development exercises as well as in interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and children's rights endeavours.

Therefore, fifth and finally, I would suggest that a second NBAR Review is now required and necessary both to update and to develop new strategies which might involve the need for some new all-Wales legislation. This should focus more on attendance than behaviour. Previously, for a whole variety of reasons, this was the other way round with the original report. There are a wide range of areas needing to be addressed; not least some possible legal changes. I should be more than happy to lead this work if that was the Minister's and Committee's wish.

Professor Ken Reid, OBE, January, 2013.

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