Inquiry by the Children and Young People Committee of the National Assembly for Wales: Attendance and Behaviour

January 2013

**Children and Young People Committee of the National Assembly for Wales
Inquiry into attendance and behaviour**

1.0 Introduction

1.1 UCAC welcomes this opportunity to submit evidence to the above Committee on two matters that have a significant effect on our members.

1.2 UCAC represents 5,000 teachers, heads and lecturers in every sector of education in Wales. The following comments are, therefore, based on evidence from teachers in classrooms and headteachers on matters relating to attendance and behaviour. Often, members contact the Union in relation to these matters when they are under a great deal of pressure and are feeling frustrated in trying to cope with difficult situations or unrealistic expectations.

1.3 The Union welcomed the Welsh Government's commitment in 2006 to undertake a National Behaviour and Attendance Review to '*develop the future approach to these challenging issues'*. While some developments on promoting positive behaviour and improving attendance have occurred, the fact that this further inquiry is being held in itself highlights the fact that the improvements were insufficient and piecemeal.

1.4 The main theme of the document **Behaving and Attending: Action Plan Responding to the National Behaviour and Attendance Review** (Dogfen 076/2009) is the unmistakeable link between educational achievement, behaviour and attendance. Even though common sense suggests that the higher the rate of attendance, the higher the level of achievement is likely to be, the statitics confirm that the correlation between these factors is striking. By the same token, having an unmanageable pupil in the classroom will obviously affect an individual's learning and that of the class, as well as the life and work of the teachers in question.

1.5 It is acknowledged that there is a clear link between some cases of challenging behaviour and the implications of that behaviour for attendance; for example, in cases of suspension or exclusion. However, linking the two has led to a concentration on this small cohort of pupils while ignoring those factors that affect attendance and behaviour as being completely separate issues. For the sake of clarity, therefore, we separate these two issues for the purposes of this submission.

2.0 Attendance

2.1 Over the past few years, several documents have been published, several steering groups have been appointed and several pilot schemes have been established and implemented with regard to attendance both on a county-wide basis and nationally. Many of the documents are repetitive and full of rhetoric, and have failed to successfully identify or get to grips with day-to-day situations in everyday language.

2.2 Establishing agreed national codes for recording absences was a valuable step towards ensuring clarity and consitency. These codes have facilitated the collection of data on every level and have led to increased consistency across Wales as intended. Since adopting the new guidance, however, too much of officials' time and energy on every level have been spent on reviewing and modifying these codes, to the detriment of giving due attention to the reasons for absences.

2.3 With regard to collecting statistics, '*putting in place new approaches and processes'* has become an entity in itself instead of being an instrument for improving attendance. The task of interpreting the statistics has, by now, become extreme and unreasonable. Including attendance rates as part of the equation when banding schools is based on the assumption that schools have total control over pupils' attendance levels.

2.4 Evidence shows that there has been no significant improvement on a national level in terms of the number of unauthorised absences since the new codes were introduced. This is despite the fact that schools, over the same period, have invested significant time and energy in establishing monitoring systems and recording attendance; these procedures have led to susbtantial costs with regard to establishing computerised systems, identifying staff who are required to make daily calls to the homes of absent children, staff time in terms of mentoring pupils and gathering and interpreting the data for internal discussions, which are fed into county and national databases. In smaller schools, these responsibilities are shouldered by Headteachers, which has taken up their teaching and management time and has also increased their workload.

2.1 What needs to be done to reduce authorised absences?

Suggestion 1

Improving Medical Support Services to ensure that they are available and are comparable in every part of Wales, while specifically:

i. Ensuring that schools have a School Nurse and School Doctor service. This service has been reduced regularly in past years and continues to be under threat, but it is indispensable in advising schools and parents on how to deal with chronic or long-term conditions, such as asthma, diabetes, skin complaints and epilepsy, which can be a barrier to pupils attending school.

ii. Provide clear and national leadership on common illnesses among children that affect their ability to attend school. At present, very mixed messages are given by schools and health service professionals with regard to when children should and should not attend school; for example, it could be clearly stated when children who have had specific illnesses, such as measles, chicken pox, mumps and so on, should return to school. Mixed messages are also given in relation to skin disorders such as impetigo, which spreads quickly through a class of infants. Publishing a booklet and sending it to every home, school, local authority surgery and library would be beneficial to everyone, and would ensure consistency in the messages that are given to parents and carers.

iii. Providing, in addition to this, clear and consistent advice and direction to parents on when it is appropriate to send their children to school and when it is more appropriate to keep them at home. Establishing a balanced and appropriate response to minor illnesses in primary years is likely to ensure appropriate behaviour at secondary school age and in the workplace. At the other extreme, children who have been vomiting or who have had diarrhoea throughout the night are arriving at school feeling faint the next morning and there is no-one there to look after them; by lunchtime, they have been ill and have infected the rest of their class and staff. Parents must realise that schools are not a childcare service.

Suggestion 2

Ensuring that sufficient funds are available to pay for support for a pupil who requires temporary practical support following an accident; for example, breaking a leg or arm, or surgery. The application processes for support of this kind are linked to Additional Educational Needs processes and are bureaucratic and long-winded. Members' experience is that these pupils have recovered, but that they have missed weeks of school, long before the application for support is heard by the relevant panel.

Suggestion 3

Making a clear statement in relation to taking pupils out of school to go on holidays/trips during the school term. There are two economic reasons why so many parents take their children out of school to go on family holidays during term time: one is the cost of the holiday, and one only has to look at any holiday

brochure to see that the cost more than doubles during usual school holidays; the other is the fact that tourism is an important industry in Wales and those who earn their living in this industry cannot afford to lose those earnings by going on holiday during peak periods. Some parents are under the impression that absences of this kind are a 'right' and that they do not have to ask permission for them.

2.2 What needs to be done to reduce unauthorised absences?

Suggestion 4

Improving Support Services and ensuring that they are available and comparable with those in every part of Wales by:

i. Ensuring that every school has consistent and sufficient support by an Education Welfare Officer. Over the past few years, there have been cuts to this service and there is often little support available for schools, particularly primary schools. Research shows that early intervention is very fruitful. Breaking a cycle of regular absences early on in a child's education is likely to decrease the likelihood of such a pattern becoming established, which often intensifies as the pupil gets older. Our members have given evidence that this service is very beneficial when it is available, but that more situations are arising where school staff have to shoulder these kinds of responsibilities at the expense of time spent on teaching and management. The link that an Education Welfare Officer establishes with parents is often crucial in achieving improved attendance.

ii. Sharing any good practice that has proved successful in some schools with other schools. Unfortunately, project work that has been successful in one place fails in other areas because the same input, with regard to money and leadership, is not offered in those other areas. Any new development must be sustainable in the long term to be of any genuine benefit.

iii. Fostering a relationship between the school and parents who are less likely to feel that they are a part of the school community. The Family Learning Programme, which is funded by the Welsh Government, is very important in this regard and anecdotal evidence clearly shows that where parents have received the support to tackle their own literacy and numeracy issues and have had the opportunity to work with their children under supervision, they are much more likely to be involved in the school (for example, attending meetings of the Parent Teacher Association or parents' evenings) and children's attendance and achievement levels increase. There is general acknowledgement that the Programme is working. In the past, there has been insufficient tracking of the effect on parents and children to provide solid evidence. However, reports, such as those by NIACE, show the importance of working with parents. Solving some of the parents' problems can have an extremely positive effect on children and their attitude towards school and education.

3.0 Behaviour

Unfortunately, the number of cases in which members have faced situations where pupils have displayed challenging behaviour is increasing. A further factor that intensifies the crisis is the fact that an increasing number of cases are coming to our attention that involve the primary sector and the Early Years in particular. These cases may be categorised as follows:

i. **Inappropriate Language and Verbal Threats**

Cases of obscene language are very common but can become threatening, with pupils threatening a member of staff verbally... '*I'm going to... you*'. Often, the threat follows verbal chastisement or is made when a pupil does not get his or her own way.

ii.   Physical Threats

It is becoming increasingly common for pupils to hit out when a staff member asks or compels them to do something. In some cases, pupils lose their temper to the extent that they turn over tables and chairs, throw things or break equipment, displays or school work – their own and that of other pupils. Sometimes this happens on a whim or as a reaction to something, and sometimes it is a targeted action.

Even though extreme behaviour of this kind is the exception, when it happens it has a significant effect on staff morale as well as on their safety. It also has a detrimental effect on the safety and learning of the class and can lead to an increase in absences. It can also undermine a teacher in the eyes of other pupils.

iii.   Emotional challenges (Challenging authority/Refusing to conform)

In some cases, pupils will openly refuse to follow instructions or will do the opposite of what they are told in a deliberate attempt to anger staff and attract attention. Sometimes, a pupil will challenge a staff member with comments such as *'you can't force me to.../you don't have the right to...'* and so on.

iv.   The use of new technology

Some pupils deliberately use new technology, such as mobile phones, to undermine teachers' authority; for example, by criticising a teacher/accusing a teacher in a public forum such as the ratemyteacher website. Other pupils use mobile phones to film an event (for example, when a teacher is challenged) and upload the footage to the internet. This secret filming, which leads to unfavourable publicity for the teacher, also affects the morale and status of the teacher and his or her relationship with the pupil/class.

We have come across examples of pupils making inappropriate use of Facebook to undermine and embarrass a teacher; for example, by creating an account in the teacher's name and uploading completely inappropriate content.

The use of e-technology in this manner has led to inquiries into behaviour, which not only endangers the status of the teacher in the short term but jeopardises his/her long-term career. It is an example of the cyber-bullying of teachers by pupils and is wholly unacceptable.

Teachers can face threatening behaviour of this kind from parents as well, including the use of obscene or threatening language, bullying, physical threat and cyber-bullying.

3.1 What needs to be done nationally?

Suggestion 5

The problem needs to be acknowledged; as does the size of the problem. Additionally, clear policies are needed at a national level – including a clear statement that challenging behaviour by pupils and their parents will not be tolerated in schools.

There also needs to be a clear and unequivocal statement that school staff do not have to suffer verbal or physical attacks. Schools have been very successful in integrating pupils with a wide range of needs, and UCAC supports every attempt to promote and encourage inclusivity in teaching and learning. However, there is a misconception that teachers have to cope with every situation because a pupil 'must be intergrated'. It has to be accepted that a point is sometimes reached when staff must refuse to teach a pupil because he or she is affecting the safety of fellow pupils and/or staff too much, or the pupil is having an unreasonable effect on other children's learning. Teachers' right to take action in situations of this kind must be protected, no matter how rarely that right is exercised.

Suggestion 6

Quality leadership and training must be ensured for school staff, be they teachers or support staff. Distributing the Booklet on Managing Behaviour to prospective teachers in Primary and Secondary sectors offers a beneficial resource to teachers at the beginning of their careers, but they also need interactive training in addition to printed guidance.

It is significant that schools have to set aside substantial periods of time to teach social skills and proficiency to young children and to help them to cope with their emotions. Programmes such as 'Ysgol Dina', Incredible Years, PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) and SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) schemes have all proved successful according to our members, especially when these programmes are introduced as part of a school-wide programme and include all staff at a school. These schemes offer a consistent and co-ordinated way of promoting good behaviour. Again, they are often funded either via project funding or specific grants, and with cuts to training budgets, for example the training budget of the Teaching Council, resources are not available for others, namely new teachers, to receive the same training.

Suggestion 7

In addition to this generic training that allows a teacher to deal successfully with low-level disruption on a daily basis, a more intensive and specific programme of support and training is needed for staff who face a challenging pupil. Often, when a school turns to external agencies for support, including turning to their union for leadership, they try to implement a host of strategies to deal with the case. The first step that is needed is intensive and immediate support to discover why the strategies that have been implemented have not worked and then to co-ordinate an intensive programme of intervention. Members' experience is that this kind of support is not available soon enough due to a lack of staff with the relevant expertise within Authorities; where qualified staff are available, their workload is so unreasonable that they are unable to devote sufficient time to schools.

When training is offered, there is a tendency for it to be offered to one person rather than to everyone who deals with the individual in question. To ensure consistency and successful intervention, everyone who comes into contact with the individual must receive the same guidance, including the parents if possible.

School staff need general and specific guidance on physical intervention. Research by individuals such as Heather Piper of Manchester Metropolitan University (The Case Against 'No Touch' Policies) shows that schools' 'No Touch' policies have been taken to an extreme. This has far-reaching implications when staff try to deal with a pupil who is physically threatening them and their fellow pupils and needs to be physically restrained. Even though UCAC does not recommend putting staff in situations in which they need to use reasonable force, when a pupil's behaviour makes such a situation likely and essential, staff must be fully trained. Our members' experience is that officials at county and national levels are unwilling to acknowledge this need and its legal implications. While these officials 'consider' what to do, staff and pupils face daily attacks, which affect the quality of the education that is offered as well as the welfare and morale of staff and pupils.

Suggestion 8

Resources needs to be allocated to promote support and collaboration with parents.

The input and support of parents are crucial in dealing with challenging behaviour. Our members' experience is that parents' response varies from denying or challenging any suggestion that there is a problem to full co-operation and sympathy. Often, in the latter scenario, it is reported that parents are themselves crying out for support and are frustrated when no-one is available to help them, so they often turn to school staff for guidance. We also received information about situations in which there is an unwillingness to provide support across county boundaries and health boards; that is, where a pupil attends

a school that is outside the county in which he or she lives or is in the territory of a different health board. Such bureaucracy cannot be justified.

Suggestion 9

We must ensure that resources are available to promote collaboration across agencies. Our members' experience is that the majority of the work falls on schools, primarily due to a lack of resources.
The usual pattern is to respond to situations that have reached a critical point rather than providing early and co-ordinated support through implementing strategies to prevent the situation from becoming critical.
Situations involving 'controlled movement' have proved successful in some cases, especially when this is seen as a new opportunity for a pupil. We must accept that such movement will not be suitable in every situation and ensure that schools are not given more than their fair share of pupils who are moved in such circumstances. Again, our members report that much depends on the level of support that is available, to the pupil and the school, to cope with the move from staff at every agency.

Concluding Statements

Ultimately, there will be no significant improvement if sufficient resources are not directed to respond to this situation by tackling the **Suggestions** above. Manipulating the figures so that the situation 'appears' to be better must end. We must, rather, interpret the data to recognise the root causes behind absences and to respond to them.

As noted above, there is already a lack of people across Wales who can offer crucial support to schools to respond to their needs with regard to dealing with challenging behaviour. UCAC is genuinely concerned that the level and quality of support will be reduced further as we see a significant reduction in the number of support staff within Local Authorities following the establishment of the regional units that appear only to be undertaking the role of monitoring and challenging.