

Note of School visit

29 June 2023

Attendees:

- James Evans MS
- Sarah Bartlett, Deputy Clerk.

██████████ is a day special school that provides education for pupils aged from 2 to 19 years.

The school is situated in ██████████ and maintained by ██████████ local authority. The school caters for pupils with a wide range of learning difficulties. These include severe learning difficulties (SLD), autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD).

The 2022 Pupil Level Annual Census showed that the school had 104 pupils, 63 boys and 41 girls, aged from 3-19. There are 15 full-time equivalent teachers.

1. Discussions with the School Council

1. The School council delivered a PowerPoint presentation. They raised a few areas that they would like to see some changes:

- They felt that there was a lack of resources and space compared to mainstream schools. They would like the use of more equipment in lessons e.g. power tools and bunsen burners, it felt that those who are able should have more opportunities to access these kind of resources. They also felt that the outdoor space could be improved for wheelchair users, the school are working with the local authority to improve the area.



- The school encourages participation in sports but the pupils felt that some of the facilities are limited. Pupils would welcome the opportunity to have more elements of the curriculum including PE on a weekly basis and the opportunity to be offered a wider range of sports including links with outside clubs.
- The school currently has one pupil sitting a couple of G.C.S.E's, pupils welcomed this opportunity and think if pupils are capable they should be encouraged to sit these exams as it would open up more courses in college. Leaders in the school are making links with colleges which will offer pupils more opportunities.
- Some of the pupils have had experience of mainstream school but prefer Ysgol Penmaes and wished that they had gone there sooner. They like being with their friends, they feel supported, understood and get the extra support and the help needed. There is also flexibility and understanding from the school e.g. medical appointments.
- Quite a few of the pupils travel quite a distance to school, some find that this can be quite disruptive.

2. The School and discussions with staff, parents and governors

Inclusive education

2. It is felt that children and young people with learning difficulties who attend mainstream schools aren't always having their needs met and getting the necessary support needed - it's like they are falling between the cracks. In some cases the children and young people don't necessarily need to attend a special school but being in inclusive education isn't right either as the support isn't available. Mainstream schools need an alteration in psychology, it's felt that they try to fit every child into one box.

3. More children are attending special schools after leaving primary school to get the support needed. However parents worry that they won't meet the entry criteria to access the special schools and therefore fear that they have nowhere to go.

4. For more children and young people with learning disabilities to be part of inclusive education there needs to be upskilling in the teaching workforce. There should be an ALN route

in Initial Teacher Education (ITT), previously you used to be able to do a PGCE in special education.

5. Covid impacted hugely on development of speech and language, social skills, children not being toilet trained. In terms of ALN, it was felt that a label helps but this takes time and needs to be evidence based. Sometimes parents themselves have learning disabilities and struggle to demonstrate this evidence and find it difficult to converse. What is needed is a multi-agency approach, it needs more than just the school and parent. You need a family liaison officer to help intervene and have the difficult conversations, they can advise mainstream schools what support is needed to help the family. A combination of a new inclusion system where all the information is in one place.

What could help: Training – making sure we are getting it right from the beginning for teachers, it's important to understand that all children are different.

Capacity of the school

6. More children are presenting with learning disabilities and quite a lot of their needs are complex. The school currently has 98 pupils and looking to increase this to 106 in September 2023. The Local authority is giving extra funding and a new funding and criteria system has been implemented but the schools still need more funding. The senior management team always find cost effective solutions and only seek help if really needed.

7. It's important that a balance is struck with taking in more pupils but not to the detriment of existing pupils. At present the school is at capacity, if it currently took in anymore pupils it would cause issues with existing pupils. It's about looking after the needs of the pupils e.g. there could be 8 in one class but 2 in another, not every class can simply increase its capacity as it depends of the needs of the pupils in that class and it can cause anxiety for children having to deal with change in class size. Having extra teachers isn't always the answer either.

8. The ALN system is too bureaucratic, to get the support needed you need to be have an evidence base and assessments which can be difficult to navigate for parents and teaching staff. Some mainstream schools aren't educated in ALN, that's why it's so important for teachers to have training on this. If schools don't understand ALN then how can they help the pupils.

9. There were a cohort of students doing ITT who wanted to specialise in teaching in special schools but this isn't recognised by the Education Workforce Council [EWC].

10. The support does vary between local authorities, there should be more joined up working: outreach in schools including peer to peer outreach, personnel from special schools going out

into the community and mainstream schools to explain what they do, teaching assistants from clusters coming together to find solutions and upskilling staff.

11. It's not always about money it's about the way the school manages the people, the ethos come from top and if an inclusive ethos is delivered then pupils will thrive.

What could help: a recognition of what is expected of staff especially teaching assistants. There is a tiered approach for teaching assistants, however in the school level 1 and level 3 do same job. Its more than just teaching, there are medical demands that staff need to deal with, it's about having balance of services.

Support for learners

12. The school provides a holistic person centred approach to learning, there is a community approach in school to provide individuals with the tools to function in the community.

13. The school looks at the individual child and what's best for their learning needs, it offers flexible learning e.g. what time of the day do they learn best, consideration of health needs.

14. The new curriculum is a basis for introducing holistic teaching into mainstream schools. The new curriculum isn't new for the school it has always been part of its teaching content. In transitions the school teaches children about a child's rights. The voice of the pupil is really important, they are always included in conversations and the school council is a strength.

15. Learning is at different levels by a certain age - 14-19 – WJEC pathway, pre entry, level 1, 2, 3 – new curriculum offers other qualifications. GCSE's are offered to Young people if they are capable. Parents are sometimes slightly confused about the different qualifications and career paths.

16. Within the school skills are widely taught. The local college also works with the schools it's a type of mentoring approach. The school is currently working with them to set up extra-curricular activities e.g. science club.

17. Transition to college past 19 years old is an issue. Young people move from a person centred approach and then go into adult world can be emotionally challenging and very difficult, work needs to be done around transitions.

What could help: More opportunities for children and young people outside of school e.g. school, holiday clubs and local opportunities to do residential life skills. Allied to this is respite with good quality additional care support for families, especially single parents.

Transport

18. It's not a barrier but there are a few issues. They have heard that's its sometimes a struggle to get funding for transport and that bus companies may find it responsibility to take on as children do have complex medical needs and could possibly have an episode on the way to school.

19. Pupils travel up to an hour to get to school - generally they enjoy travelling on a bus to, it's part of their routine and they like being with their friends.

20. As a school they found that after the travel to school children aren't ready to learn so in September they are trialling a new system where between 09.00 – 09.45 the children will do an activity to help with their mental health so that they are in a place for learning, it's about building relationships and having a holistic approach to the child, not one size fits all.

Bullying

21. Not within the school, there is a silver rights respect, there is more acceptance of being different and inclusivity. However, there is still a stigma in the community around special schools, they aren't seen as a school and aren't seen as good enough.

22. A lot of the pupils from the school live in rural settings which can lead to feeling isolated when they are not in school.

23. Bullying is more likely to happen in mainstream schools and outside of the school setting. People are recognising it more, lots of work has been done on antibullying, it's about educating pupils to recognise that's not how you should be treated.

What could help: You need to break down the stigma, senior leaders in mainstream schools should understand what special schools offer and that the pupils are offered the same education but it's just delivered in a different way.