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**Minister for Education and Skills**



**Llywodraeth Cymru**  
**Welsh Government**

Ein cyf/Our ref MB/HL/3091/15

Ann Jones AM,  
Chair,  
Children, Education and Young  
People Committee,  
National Assembly for Wales

6 August 2015

Dear Ann,

I appeared before the Children Young People and Education Committee in December to provide evidence on the committee's inquiry into educational outcomes for children from low income households. At that meeting I said that I thought the work of school staff employed to work with families was worth a closer look nationally.

I asked my officials to conduct a short review of this work and I attach a copy of the report for the committee's information.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Huw Lewis'.

**Huw Lewis AC / AM**  
**Y Gweinidog Addysg a Sgiliau**  
**Minister for Education and Skills**

# Family Liaison Officers in Schools in Wales

A short study on the work undertaken by designated support staff with children and their families in a sample of schools in Wales.

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July 2015

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## 1. Introduction

1.1. *Rewriting the Future: raising ambition and attainment in Welsh schools* is the Welsh Government's policy on tackling the impact of poverty on educational attainment. The policy is underpinned by significant investment in the form of the Pupil Deprivation Grant which, in 2015-16 was over £82 million. A further £4.5 million has been invested in the Communities First Pupil Deprivation Grant Matched Fund over 3 years to encourage schools and communities to work collaboratively to tackle the debilitating effects of poverty.

*'...evidence shows that family characteristics and the home learning environment are a significant factor in determining children and young people's attainment.'*

Qualified for Life (2014)

- 1.2. One of *Rewriting the Future's* four key themes is family and community engagement, in recognition of the fact that what happens outside school plays a significant part in how well children perform when they are in school. Many schools have acknowledged the influence of the home environment and have employed non-teaching members of staff to work with parents and carers. These staff members have a range of titles which reflect the variety of roles they undertake. For ease of reference the term 'Family Liaison Officer (FLO)' is used throughout this report.
- 1.3. A small-scale study was undertaken to provide a clearer view of the roles and impact of FLOs and the way schools use staff to work with families. It has included visits to 11 schools and discussions with three Community First co-ordinators. Survey Monkey was used to distribute a short on-line questionnaire via the Welsh Government's Dysg newsletter. Responses to the questionnaire were received from 24 line managers and individuals employed to undertake work in the context of the school and family. A number of reports and research articles on family engagement and pupil deprivation were considered to add context and breadth to the focus of this study.
- 1.4. Completion of this report coincided with publication of *FaCE the Challenge Together: family and engagement toolkit for schools in Wales*. Where the *FaCE* guidance addresses issues in the summary of findings, these are referenced in this report.

## 2. Findings – Programmes

- 2.1. The study found a wide range of activities and support provided to families by schools. Schools in the sample have recognised the important contribution that families can make to support their children's learning.
- 2.2. There was a greater prevalence of staff identified as FLOs in the primary schools surveyed than in the secondary schools.
- 2.3. Most of FLO posts are relatively new and much of the focus has been on providing non-formal family activities such as weekly coffee mornings; family and child cookery classes; and Dads and Lads projects.
- 2.4. Some staff are engaged in the transition of learners moving from primary to secondary schools. There were good examples of support which help learners feel better prepared for secondary school.
- 2.5. The work undertaken in the secondary schools in this study tended to place greater emphasis on direct support for learners. This support included pastoral care, additional support for literacy and numeracy, homework, counselling and help with behavioural issues. It was not always clear that learners in the target groups received priority support for such approaches.
- 2.6. Family engagement most often featured in the secondary sector where a specific intervention required family support rather than as a system of ongoing and proactive engagement.
- 2.7. Many of the schools that responded have developed both formal and informal links to external agencies. The formal links tended to be in relation to services such as the criminal justice system, social services and CAMHS, as well as other targeted specialist support.
- 2.8. FLOs often act as the first point of contact in facilitating engagement on behalf of families with a range of services such as team around the family, health or social services, or services provided by the voluntary sector. This approach has the benefit of providing one contact point for the family.
- 2.9. The wide and varied role of FLOs has led to interventions aimed at increasing engagement with families, keeping learners in school and improving their educational outcomes. The staff who responded to the survey identified a range of approaches that they used to measure impact, including:
  - a detailed action plan setting out targets for family engagement;
  - improving national test scores;
  - improving attendance figures; and
  - narrowing of the gap between pupils eligible for free schools meals and those who are not eligible.

### 3. Other evidence - Programmes:

- 3.1. There is only limited international evidence in terms of what works in secondary schools in relation to family engagement:

*'The association between parental involvement and a child's academic success is well established, but rigorous evaluation of approaches to improve learning through parental involvement is more sparse. The evidence is predominantly from primary level and the early years, though there are studies which have looked at secondary schools. Impact studies tend to focus on reading and mathematics attainment'*

The Education Endowment Foundation Teaching and Learning Toolkit

- 3.2. There is evidence<sup>1</sup> however, that parental engagement, particularly for learners from low income households, can reduce the dip in attainment at transition from primary into secondary school. Estyn<sup>2</sup> has also found that schools and setting that are successful in tackling the impact of poverty on educational attainment often have strong links with parents.

- 3.1. The NFER<sup>3</sup> found that when parental engagement leads to an improved home learning environment and increased parental confidence in supporting children's literacy at home, there can be significant impacts on achievement. This reinforces Battle-Bailey et al's findings that:

*Parents who were given interactive homework and were trained on how to support that homework, doubled the amount of time they spent on helping their children ... and their children performed the best."*

Battle-Bailey et al. (2004) The Effects of Interactive Reading Homework and Parent Involvement on Children's Inference Responses Springer

- 3.2. The NFER, however, found that schools often do not robustly evaluate their parental engagement work and this finding echoes those of the Department of Education in its review of best practice in parental engagement<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson P., (2011) *A Rapid Evidence Assessment Investigating the Drop in Attainment during the Transition Phase with a Particular Focus on Child Poverty*. Welsh Government

<sup>2</sup> *The Annual Report of HM Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales, 2013-2014*

<sup>3</sup> Grayson, H. (2013). *Rapid Review of Parental Engagement and Narrowing the Gap in Attainment for Disadvantaged Children*. Slough and Oxford: NFER and Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Goodhall, J, Vorhaus, J. (2011) *Review of best practice in parental engagement*. Department of Education. London

## **Links with the FaCE Toolkit**

The FaCE guidance provides examples of a range of practice in Foundation and primary phase which act as a gateway to providing more formal family engagement activities. These support families to understand how they can engage effectively in supporting their child in such areas as literacy, numeracy, attendance and behaviour [2.3].

The FaCE guidance makes reference to importance of planned transitions activities which include family engagement at Foundation, Primary and Secondary which could include informal 'meet the teacher/meet the family sessions' [2.4].

Theme five of the FaCE guidance identifies how schools can develop or build on existing partnership with agencies and their communities [2.7].

Theme four provides engagement for learning resources for Foundation Phase, primary and secondary sectors [3.1]

Theme 1 resource 6 provides schools with guidance on conducting evaluations [3.2].

## **4. Findings – Qualifications Skills, Roles and Responsibilities**

- 4.1. Over half the respondents to the survey said that their role exclusively involved working with families and learners. Other respondents combined this work with other roles and responsibilities.
- 4.2. Typically a FLO's role involves:
  - organising parenting classes;
  - organising after-school activities;
  - identifying, supporting and empowering disengaged families;
  - engaging with parents and teachers to provide activities to promote learning; and
  - developing solutions to personal, emotional and physical problems, including those which relate to behaviour
- 4.3. There is no requirement for school staff involved in working with families to hold a relevant qualification. There are, however, a number of qualifications available which cover a range of approaches to working with parents
- 4.4. The study found that FLOs do hold a wide range of relevant qualifications, such as teaching, nursing and support staff qualifications. Others are parents of children who are, or have been pupils at the school and have very close links with the community in which they live. Many schools consider this is important for effective engagement with families.

4.5. A number of FLOs in this study were attending relevant courses provided by key partners, but this approach seemed to be on an ad hoc basis and was dependent on the availability of courses.

## 5. Other Evidence – Qualifications, Skills, Roles and Responsibilities:

5.1. Goodall and Vorhaus<sup>5</sup> suggest that school staff should be given appropriate coaching and training to enable them to engage with parents effectively. This is particularly important for staff whose backgrounds are very different to those of the families they are working with.

5.2. Parenting in Wales Guidance states:

*‘Practitioners should be appropriately skilled, trained and supervised to work with parents. They should have appropriate personal skills and traits and their work should be underpinned by the National Occupational Standards for Work with Parents principles and values’*

Parenting in Wales: Guidance on engagement and support (2014)  
Welsh Government

5.3. The National Occupational Standards for Work with Parents were originally approved by the United Kingdom (UK) Regulatory bodies (QCA, SQA, ACCAC and QCA NI) in 2005. The Standards were updated in January 2011.

5.4. Harris and Goodall<sup>6</sup> found that sustained support, resource and training were prerequisites for schools to engage parents effectively and make a sustainable difference. This was particularly true for engaging families in low income households. The researchers concluded that staff, including non-teaching staff, who work most closely with parents, should be provided with training.

### Links with the FaCE Toolkit

Theme 2, resource 2 outlines the role of a Family and Community Engagement Officer (or FLO) and provides an example job description [4].

The FaCE guidance provides examples of what all schools should do and what successful schools do. This includes conducting a development needs analysis as part of the school development plan [4.5].

Theme 2, resource 2 provides a template for a development needs analysis and sets out the National Occupational Standards for working with families [5.2].

Theme 1, Resource 1 provides information about the School Development Plan and budgeting for staff roles and development [5.4]

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<sup>5</sup> ibid

<sup>6</sup> Harris, A. and Goodall, J (2007). *Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement: Do Parents Know They Matter?* University of Warwick



## 6. Some insights:

- 6.1. Schools in the study recognise the importance of family engagement and for some it was a key priority for the school:

*'[Our aim is to] improve standards and wellbeing in pupils by ensuring parents and carers have a better understanding of ways to help their children at home. Develop a true family-friendly school built on cooperation and trust.'*

- 6.2. They have a range of aims and objectives for engaging families, such as improving standards, reducing absenteeism or closing the gap in attainment resulting from poverty. For some schools the reasons for employing FLOs have evolved over time:

*'Originally [the role was] to assist with improving attendance but the role moved more to family support by the nature of the requests. The role is primarily support and engagement rather than assisting with improving attendance.'*

- 6.3. Some schools employed FLOs to reduce the burden on head teachers and senior leaders, or else to provide a more proportionate and less threatening approach to head teacher involvement:

*'...to provide a specific link who would act as the first call with families...It was important that they could build trust with families... to give a graduated response before the head teacher needed to be involved.'*

## 7. Funding:

- 7.1. Schools fund FLOs through a variety of mechanisms:

- Most Communities First Pupil Deprivation Grant (CFPDG) matched fund projects employ a FLO. These are often shared between schools or between schools and Community First Clusters.
- Some schools that are Schools Challenge Cymru (SCC) Pathways to Success Schools have funded FLOs through the SCC grant.
- Schools are increasingly using the PDG to fund FLOs.
- Some schools use core funding to employ FLOs.

- 7.2. Those schools that have used grant funding see the value of the work that their FLOs do and are many are committed to finding ways to continue to fund the post beyond the lifetime of the grant.
- 7.3. Some schools have been nervous that employing FLOs was ineligible expenditure under the terms and conditions of the Pupil Deprivation Grant. Welsh Government has published refreshed guidance which makes it clear that the grant may be used in this way.

## **8. Summary of Findings and Conclusions:**

- 8.1. There is a wide variety of activity being undertaken in schools to engage families and just as many reasons that schools undertake this activity. Family Liaison Officers have varied backgrounds and skills; their family engagement activity may be part of a wider remit or may be the main remit of their role. Some FLOs have sole responsibility for engaging with families and may be shared between schools, where others, particularly in the secondary sector, are part of a wider family engagement team with different remits, such as pastoral support, improving attendance, and supporting family learning.
- 8.2. Research evidence suggests that family engagement has positive outcomes on educational attainment, and that this is particularly true for learners from low income households. There is little robust evidence, however, about what it is that makes the difference. This may have a bearing on the reason why there is such a wide range of family engagement activity in schools. While schools may, and often do, evaluate the impact of their own work with parents, the range and variety of FLO posts, skills and responsibilities makes it difficult to form an evidence-based assessment of the overall impact of FLOs nationally.
- 8.3. The Welsh Government has produced guidance and resources for schools, and the most recent of these, the FaCE guidance, addresses many of the findings of this study. The framework at Annex 2 takes account of current Welsh Government initiatives but also suggests ways of improving key points such as transition and secondary school engagement.

# Case Studies

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## 1. Pembroke Dock Community School

The two family support officers at Pembroke Dock Community School provide in-house provision for parents, children and families of the school. They aim to build positive relationships with families where parents know that they can drop in for support and advice throughout the day. They also work closely with external agencies such as the police/community police, Team Around the Family, social workers, the school nurse, health visitor, Sandy Bears bereavement counselling service, and housing; making referrals as necessary.

The pair provides emotional and practical help, support and advice to families that may be experiencing long or short-term difficulties. This might include signposting support to families with housing concerns, completing forms, working with external agencies, organizing school clubs or simply being somebody for parents to talk to. They will arrange for children to be collected from home and transported to school if a parent is experiencing difficulties such as illness. They regularly work with over 260 pupils and over 100 families.

Each term begins with the family support officers making home visits to aid the transition of children from Flying Start to Early Years. Families value the support, during what can be an anxious time, when their children start full time education.

The weekly Mother and Toddler group meets in the school and this is led by the family support officers. They actively encourage parents to attend, reinforcing the benefits of joining other parents at the weekly group. Together they work with Communities First and a parent helper volunteer to ensure that parents and toddlers have a positive and enjoyable experience.

Part of their role is to improve the attendance of pupils who are struggling to attend school regularly or who are persistently late. This involves speaking with the families and their children to encourage attendance at their 8 am morning clubs and arrange collection by the school mini bus each morning. The children are also encouraged to access the support available to them.

The school provides a variety of clubs including cookery, ICT, iPad, free running, sports, story reading, library and intervention programmes. Attendance in the school is now averaging at 95% and continues to improve with this support.

The school also participates in Save the Children's Families and Schools Together (FAST) programme. The second cohort taking part in the FAST programme was lead by the school's family support officers. Together they worked with the school, parent and community partners to organise and deliver the eight week programme. Throughout the activities FAST partners act as a 'shadow' to offer support and advice to encourage the parents.

The family support officers also organise weekly coffee afternoons. This is a time where parents can informally chat with them about any concerns they may have and where Story Sacks and Numicon parent packs, which support their children in literacy and numeracy, are loaned out. The Community Police, Community First and local clergy often pop in for a coffee and a chat which is warmly welcomed by the parents.

The family support officers work with parents and the school nurse in preparing Healthcare Plans. They liaise with the school catering manager to advise on special dietary requirements and allergies. They also work closely with the head teacher and staff with child protection/wellbeing concerns and make referrals to agencies for additional support. They also attend Core Group meetings with families and other professionals to support families with their protective plan.

## 2. Millbrook Primary School

Millbrook Primary School is a one form entry 3-11 primary school located on The Bettws Estate in Newport. There are 240 pupils on roll. Approximately 28% of pupils are entitled to free school meals and 30% of pupils have additional educational needs. Bettws is a Communities First area.

The school's philosophy is that:

- happy children learn;
- to support the child effectively the school must support the family;
- to support the family effectively, the school must work with the community;
- engagement is most effective when it involves children and their families from a very early age.

The head teacher, Lindsey Watkins, has visited several community schools in the USA and the school's approach is based on first hand research looking at the work of Children's Aid Society Schools in New York where community schools employ family engagement officers.

The school's work is also based on research which highlights the positive impact that working to engage parents and pupils can have on standards of learning.

*'Parental engagement is a powerful lever for raising student achievement in schools. Where parents and teachers work together to improve learning, the gains in achievement are significant.'*

Harris, A. and Goodall, J (2007). Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement: Do Parents Know They Matter? University of Warwick

The school provides on site multi-agency support for families and the community including Communities First, Newport City Council Team Around the Family, Flying Start, The Bridge Achievement Centre and Stay and Play. It has found taking a multi-agency partnership approach has a number of benefits:

- it provides a consistent joined up approach from all agencies;
- it ensures that families are better supported;
- it allows the school and its partner agencies to be proactive;
- it has provided additional resources to the school at no extra cost (Communities First have match funded the school's Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG), for example); and
- the school is better equipped to tackle educational issues by alleviating or supporting other family issues.

In addition to its multi-agency work the school uses its PDG to employ a Pupil and Family Engagement Officer (PFEO) and a nurture officer who work in tandem to support the particular needs of pupils and their families.

The PFEO strives to motivate and engage pupils and their families in learning. Family Thursdays have become a feature of the school with parents and children engaging in literacy and numeracy activities on a regular basis. The school's reading café has proven to be particularly popular. The PFEO works with groups of children throughout the school and is well-placed to link pupils specific learning needs with their work with families.

The PFEO has also provided out-of-hours learning including summer holiday Coding Clubs for children and their families. The strong partnership with Communities First has supported

other family learning initiatives such as a family homework club in the local library. The school also operates a parent council which has representatives from each class in the school. The PFEO works with the school leadership team to guide the work of the parent council.

### **Outcomes and lessons learned**

The impact of this work is a joined up approach to pupil and family intervention; an increase in the numbers of parents involved in pupil learning; improved pupil attendance; and improved reading behaviours of targeted children. Some examples of improvements are outlined below:

- Parental engagement in maths family learning workshops has increased from 40% to just over 80%.
- Whole school attendance has risen by over 1.5% in the last year
- Individual pupil attendance case studies have had increases of up to 50%.
- Staff and parents report that pupils are showing a more positive attitude towards their learning.
- Pupils involved in a family reading café initiative are reading with greater fluency and understanding.
- Parents report that they are reading more at home.
- 100% of pupils with parents engaged in this work have achieved the targets set for them.

The school piloted a family engagement officer role last academic year as a shared role with three other local schools. This allowed ideas and best practice to be shared, but it limited the amount of work that could be done with the families at Millbrook. It also meant that work was focussed specifically on families and allowed little time to link this with the pupils' work. It was decided that it would be more beneficial to have a full-time engagement officer and to adapt the job description so that the work was also closely linked to pupil learning.

The school did not want to lose the benefits it had from the joined learning opportunities with other schools. For this reason Millbrook has hosted a free Family Engagement Network meeting for interested schools in South Wales. This is something that school aims to continue with partner schools in the future.

### Outcomes framework for pupil and family engagement for PDG and LAC from 0 —10

#### Family Engagement

Parenting support programmes.

Early language development and play skills

Individual family / school visits.

Family induction evenings

Non formal family activities

Targeted family activities programmes to support reading

Non formal family activities

Formal planned training to support behaviour and emotional issues

Raising horizons activities for families

Engaging with parents to ensure they participate in transition

Activities.

Hold events for parents with key secondary school staff including those in support roles

#### Pupil

Delivering relevant activities and programmes to build pupils self esteem and resilience

Delivering transition activities with FLO and teaching staff from secondary school

#### Programmes

Flying Start

Foundation Phase

0

3/4

7

8

9

10

Ages

## Outcomes framework for pupil and family engagement for PDG and LAC from 11 —16

<b>Family Engagement</b>	Engaging with parents to ensure they participate in transition	Support for parents evenings Ongoing and regular communication with Families Curriculum aspiration planning with child and families/ GCSE choices Raising aspirations activities Effective work experience	Course / GCSE support engagement with Families. Additional study engagement and planning. Career pathway discussion	Engagement with families for transition support to post 16 provision	
<b>Pupil</b>	Pupil engagement/ pupil voice	Learning mentor support Study skills			
<b>Programmes</b>	Transition				
	11	12/13	14	15	16
	<b>Ages</b>				