

Overview and Scrutiny Ofsted Subgroup

Minutes of the meeting held on 8 March 2010

Present:

Councillor Cox - In the Chair

Councillors Judge, Keller (Items CYP/OSG/10/05 – 07), Parkinson, Sandiford (in place of Councillor Fisher), Tavernor

Jenny Andrews, Head of Education Services, Inclusion

Kieran McDermott, Assistant Director, Children's Services - Education

David Goddard, Assistant Headteacher of Wright Robinson College

Cas Page, Headteacher of Our Lady's RC Primary School

Apologies:

Councillor Fisher

David Arnold

CYP/OSG/10/05 Minutes

Decision:

To agree the minutes of the meeting held on 12 January 2010 as a correct record.

CYP/OSG/10/06 Attendance

The Chair welcomed Cas Page, Headteacher of Our Lady's RC Primary School, and David Goddard, Assistant Headteacher of Wright Robinson College, who had been invited to inform the Subgroup of the initiatives their schools had in place to increase attendance. The Chair stressed the significance of this issue in Manchester and the importance of identifying good practice across the city.

The Head of Education Services, Inclusion, gave a presentation on the progress that had been made across the city in raising overall attendance. Manchester had been given a red flag for attendance in schools under the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA), but it had already been a priority for the Council before that. The Head of Education Services provided the Subgroup with figures which showed there had been steady improvement. In particular, the central east district of the city had shown a significant improvement.

Achieving improvements activities can be considered under three headings: school activities, the Council initiatives and work with partners. Schools needed to implement positive attendance measures. The Council could support and enhance these measures, for example through attendance blitzes and truancy sweeps. Partners, such as the NHS and Police, are also supporting schools in addressing some of the underlying causes of non-attendance. The Head of Education Services

said that it was too early to see the statistical results of some measures, e.g. blitzes, but there was strong anecdotal evidence that there had been improvements as a result of them.

The Head of Education Services pointed out that the overall figures for persistent absence, students who had at any point in the year missed 20% or more of available sessions, had reduced from the previous year. There had been an increase in absence at the beginning of the academic year, attributed to swine flu. The figures provided also included the data from schools that stayed open during the week the city had experienced heavy snowfall: lower attendance had been expected, but did not occur.

The Assistant Headteacher of Wright Robinson College, Mr David Goddard, outlined the measures to raise attendance at Wright Robinson College, which had led to the persistent absence rate being halved. The school had previously had problems with attendance, with 300 pupils off on a daily basis. They introduced a target for each student to attend 95% of the time, and launched a campaign which highlighted the strong link between attendance at school and success later in life.

Every four weeks each child was ranked into groups according to their attendance. If a student had attendance below 92%, there was a process by which various people would have discussions with them, including their form tutor and head of year. If they did not improve, an attendance worker from the school would visit their family. The school had found that often this was the first time someone had spoken directly to them about their child's attendance.

The Headteacher of Our Lady's RC Primary School, Mrs Cas Page explained that attendance had always been a high priority at her school, with a targets of 98% overall attendance. At the beginning of the academic year they had 96 – 7% attendance and three persistently absent pupils. She emphasised that rewarding students was crucial to raising overall attendance. They held ceremonies where governors gave prizes out and at the end of the year the pupils with 100% attendance would have a day out.

Our Lady's RC Primary have a team of two staff whose mornings are dedicated to making calls to parents of children who had not turned up that day. This had been so successful that they now hardly needed to make any calls, because parents were ringing the school first.

A member asked if the schools who had achieved success shared their techniques and information with other schools. Mr Goddard explained that they held meetings with attendance officers from other schools and the agencies involved where they shared examples of what had and had not worked. A member also asked whether primary schools shared the information on attendance they had with the secondary schools the pupil went on to attend. Mr Goddard said that Wright Robinson had received this information this academic year.

The Chair asked if there were any schools that resisted change. The Assistant Director said that there had in the past been some challenges because the performance framework used by the Council was stricter than that used by Ofsted. In

addition, an improvement in the monitoring of attendance often led to a statistical drop in performance.

A member asked Mrs Page and Mr Goddard what the key difference between the approach now and the approach ten years ago was. Mrs Page said it was that they had to be brave enough to be honest and face the problems they were experiencing regarding attendance. Mr Goddard said that ten years ago attainment was the only thing anyone looked at. Now there was an acknowledgement that attainment and attendance were closely linked and the former could not be improved without also improving the latter.

A member asked what could be done if a school claimed that they had tried everything, with no improvement made. The Head of Education Services said that if there were no improvements then it would not be the case that they had tried everything.

Decision:

1. To note the serious challenge posed by poor attendance in some Manchester schools.
2. To note the overall improvement made across Manchester.
3. To support the practice of schools sharing examples and information on measures that had worked well.

CYP/OSG/10/07 Governance

The Subgroup then turned its attention to the role of school governors and its strong link with attendance. Mr Goddard described the changes they had made to the governing arrangements at Wright Robinson College, which happened within their overall reassessment of how to deal with attendance. He outlined a key policy change that had made a difference, which was to introduce a rule that holidays in term time would not be authorised if the pupil did not have 95% attendance. This was unpopular with some parents because holidays were cheaper in term time. Mrs Page said that something they sometimes found useful in cases like that was to sit down with the parents and look at other possible options.

The consensus was that governing bodies had an important role in supporting the attempts to improve attendance. Mrs Page and Mr Goddard both said that this had been carried out in their respective schools. The Assistant Director said that if a governing body was refusing to engage then it was important that the School Effectiveness Officer (SEO) used their position to inform and support the Governors in order that the governing body fulfils its role.

The Chair asked if the city was getting any closer to a Governors' step change in terms of the governing body improving attendance. The Assistant Director said that it was an accumulation of small improvements and so there was no definite answer.

A member wanted to know if there was anything Manchester could learn from other authorities who had improved significantly. Members felt that this would be a positive exercise, however they were advised that in other parts of the country differing attendance practices were used and that some of these were not in accordance with government guidelines. This would hamper meaningful comparisons being made so there was no simple answer.

The Chair said that the Subgroup was encouraged with what they had heard, despite the red flag the city had received. The Chair thanked Mrs Page and Mr Goddard for taking the time to help better their understanding of the practical side of attainment, attendance and governance.

Decision:

To recommend to the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee to note the examples of good practice in relation to attendance and governance. And to recommend to the Committee to continue its detailed scrutiny of attendance in the next municipal year.

CYP/OSG/10/08 Work Programme

The Subgroup's work programme was submitted.

Decision:

To agree the work programme of the Ofsted Subgroup.