

EDUCATION AFTER THE PANDEMIC

1. EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

The voluntary sector, along with the Welsh Government, is concerned about the impact the pandemic has had on the educational development of children. This has been especially prominent in relation to those year groups who have been assessed for GCSEs and A Levels in this period. However, the effect of reductions in teacher contact time will be seen on children of all ages, including those in the early years where the delays in development can be difficult to address later on.

As with educational development more generally, living in poverty is likely to have had a relatively larger impact on educational development in this period. Many voluntary sector organisations in Wales support children with their education development, and we are concerned by the additional number of children who are behind on some development milestones as a result of the pandemic.

Examples of action from the voluntary sector:

During the pandemic, **WCIA** moved its debate training programme online. Now young people from all backgrounds across Wales can develop skills and confidence to discuss, debate and act on global issues, while empathising with other perspectives; enabling them to add their voices to achieve Wales' Wellbeing Goals. Participants receive practical support from a Debate Coordinator over zoom and go through an online self study course. They can then take part in debate activities on their own or by joining our Wales Debating Competition. Afterwards, 63% of learners had improved their public speaking confidence, 76% have developed their critical thinking skills, and 90% have developed their understanding of global issues from multiple perspectives

Llanfair Uniting Church in Penrhys and **Noddfa Chapel** in Abersychan established homework clubs (or catch-up clubs) to provide free support to children in relation to their education following the pandemic. Children engage fully with 'catch up' (and education generally) when it is seen as a community activity, rather than something separate from the rest of life.

In 2020, **Rhieni dros Addysg Gymraeg** (Parents for Welsh Medium Education) launched a questionnaire to try to gather information about the effects of the lock-down period on families and children in Welsh-medium Education. The questionnaire was launched in June 2020 asking parents to identify the effects of the lockdown period on their children and on them as parents. It was an unprecedented time with learning and teaching having to transition from classroom to digital forcing us to adopt new practices and functions. One of the outcomes of the questionnaire was the setting up of a new website for parents by RhAG called www.welsh4parents.cymru. The website was intended to create a directory that would provide links for resources across the web in one convenient place for parents to access thousands of resources available for them and for children of all ages. The website is constantly being updated as new resources become available and any new resource is welcomed and can be sent to RhAG to be included on the website. In conjunction with the website a helpline had also been launched for parents who needed closer contact and more specific support.

Voluntary sector calls:

The Welsh Government has provided significant amounts of funding for schools in order to support children close the gap in relation to attainment. This is welcome and has mostly been used by schools to fund additional teaching hours. However, a wide range of evidence suggests that children's education development is best supported at home and in the community, alongside activity on the school. As a result, we would call for future investment to include schemes outside the classroom, as well as within it, to maximise the opportunities to support children's educational development. The voluntary sector should also be involved in the design of these policies at an early stage.

2. WELLBEING

The impact of the pandemic and lockdowns has had an effect on the mental health and wellbeing of children and learners of all ages. Families more widely have faced challenging times with this also happening at a time when the demands on parents to support their children's education have been greater than ever. As a consequence, we have seen increased mental health challenges for children, increased rates of domestic abuse and gender-based violence in the home which affects children even if they are not directly the victims. Global issues such as climate change and inequality also impact negatively on the mental health of young people.

There is clear evidence that wellbeing is a significant factor in educational attainment. With statutory and voluntary services facing increased demand and a growing backlog, the voluntary sector is concerned that this will have a longer-term impact on some children and their families than is currently recognised. Alongside an investment in improving educational attainment after the pandemic, the Welsh Government must support children's and families' wellbeing and mental health during this time.

Voluntary sector calls:

The Welsh Government supports the value of wellbeing activity in schools, although this has been set in the context of reducing budgets for schools to fund these activities. However, evidence is clear that children with a strong sense of wellbeing are in a better place to develop, both as people and as learners. The voluntary sector would like to see this recognised clearly in Welsh Government education policy; also noting that organisations outside of schools are well-placed to provide much of the support here. We would like to see a parity of esteem for well-being development alongside academic development.

Examples of action from the voluntary sector:

Place2Be is a professional mental health service embedded within school communities. The charity currently reaches over 2,500 pupils and their families in 12 schools across South Wales. By being based within the environment of the school, Place2Be can facilitate the development of a positive Whole School Approach to mental health, creating mentally healthy schools and a positive culture of wellbeing. Place2Be is a pioneer in early

intervention. This can stop issues escalating and developing into adolescence and adulthood. Place2Be works closely with local public services such as NHS CAMHS and local authority children's services to ensure that every child gets the right support. Analysis shows that supporting pupils with their mental health and wellbeing results in fewer fixed term exclusions, and improved engagement in learning.

Bridgend Association of Voluntary Organisations' STEER project work with volunteers who are referred from CAMHS and has had very positive results. Volunteering has provided a release from stress and escalating anxiety, volunteering in the outdoor setting has provided an ideal setting to support Wellbeing. Two young people have gone on to take part in several conferences to provide a young person's voice in their own community, telling us they want to share their own experiences of poor mental health and how being at our centre which provides a nature, nurture approach has supported their own wellbeing. These two young people also attended a conference with the local Health Board and have been requested to become the young people's representatives on the local health board which they accepted. Both these young ladies are also completing their exams i.e. Welsh Baccalaureate and A Levels and have been referred to us as part of their intervention to support the challenges they currently face with poor mental health. They both tell us that attending our volunteer sessions has supported a release from the stresses of everyday life and improved their own wellbeing.

3. EQUALITIES

There is plenty of evidence of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic and lockdowns on groups with protected characteristics, including learners from ethnic minority backgrounds, learners living in poverty, and learners with learning disabilities (and especially those who are at the intersection of a number of these characteristics). The attainment and well-being gap between children facing disadvantage and their peers has grown throughout lockdown. The voluntary sector is concerned that this gap won't be closed without specific measures that take account of these inequalities and address them. However, we do note the recent positive focus on a government-wide approach to equality issues, and the production of the Race Equality Action Plan and upcoming LGBTQ+ Action Plan.

Examples of action from the voluntary sector:

Through the Price of Pupil Poverty project, **Children in Wales** has worked closely with schools and regional consortia to develop a suite of resources for schools in Wales. These resources aim to raise awareness of pupil poverty and set out the impact poverty has on a child's day to day life in a school setting. The resources provide tangible and cost-effective solutions that can contribute to improved learner well-being. The main resources are a series of five guides, which are grounded in the Welsh Government's commitment to tackle increasing levels of child poverty and to improve the mental health and emotional well-being of all children in Wales, drawing on key Welsh Government legislation, policies and guidance. The five thematic guides are:

1. Understanding the causes, key drivers and impact of poverty on learners living in low income families,
2. School Uniform and Clothing,
3. Food and Hunger,

4. Participation in the Life of the School, and,
5. Home-School Relationship.

As part of the project, a series of workshops and whole-school training sessions have also been delivered to partners. We are grateful to officials for their support to expand the project this year, as this will enable us to reach more schools and have a greater impact.

Barnardo's Cymru also launched BOLOH – our helpline for children from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic backgrounds. BOLOH is a website (including live chat) and helpline for children aged 11 and over. The helpline can provide assistance on issues such as:

- Advice and information on how to look after a child with respiratory infections
- Issues experienced as a result of the pandemic, for example; losing a loved one, ill-health, bullying, racism, feeling worried about the future, down or isolated
- Practical support with meeting the needs of a child e.g. food, devices, clothing
- Support with mental health and wellbeing through therapeutic support.

Therapeutic support can be offered in a wide number of languages via this service.

Voluntary sector calls:

We are keen to see how the education department will implement the new Race Equality Plan and LGBTQ+ Action Plan (as well as others which may be developed), and how the relationships between the department and other departments will develop to ensure that learners facing discrimination will benefit from collaborative working. This should also include an understanding of the financial support available to implement these proposals.

Secondly, voluntary sector organisations speak regularly to teachers in schools and other settings who feel supportive of, but unprepared for, addressing matters of inequality. We would recommend strengthening both ITT and CPD in this regard.