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Education Challenges in Wales

In the coming five years, the education system in Wales will undergo a significant programme of reform intended to fundamentally change the way that it operates. At the same time, there will be sustained pressure to improve attainment levels overall, particularly for disadvantaged groups, and to deliver on Welsh medium education. All this will be against a backdrop of continuing spending pressures which, even if education budgets are protected, will put strain on the education system. Perhaps now more than ever, policy-makers in Wales need evidence about what works in education and how to identify and implement interventions that are going to be most effective in achieving priorities at a time of diminishing real terms resources.

Over the last two years, in response to Ministers' evidence needs, we have worked with experts to:

- Analyse what works in promoting emotional resilience in primary school children.
- Assess what works in providing effective support to secondary school pupils.
- Examine the role of Continuing Professional Development in closing the attainment gap.
- Provide guidance on best practice in the delivery of arts education.
- Explore what works in fostering high quality vocational education.
- Analyse the potential for increasing the use of school facilities outside school hours.
- Examine the advantages and disadvantages of asymmetric school week systems.

Some of the key messages from this work are summarised below.



Primary schools can have a lasting positive impact on children's emotional health

The international evidence shows that primary schools can have a lasting positive impact on school children's emotional health which in turn influences academic achievement. There is good evidence of what works and excellent guidance and resources are available. It has been shown that supporting young people's emotional health requires a holistic approach that is embedded in the curriculum and wider school systems. Our report makes 16 recommendations on how to develop a carefully planned and well-supported approach to social and emotional learning that is integrated with core pedagogical principles and a school's overall approach to learning and student support.



Pupil support in secondary schools needs to be tailored to individual needs

Well-being needs to be put at the heart of the secondary school curriculum. The evidence shows that effective support requires a whole school ethos which is supported by school leaders and teaching staff. Pupils need to be engaged in the design and delivery of support. Engagement with families, communities, external agencies and employers and collaboration between schools are also important. Responsibility for pupil support should be shared by all teachers but specialist teams have a role to play in supporting vulnerable students and working with external agencies. There is a lot of existing good practice in Wales to draw on and the Welsh Government's plans to reform the curriculum, teaching training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) provide an important opportunity to improve pupil support at secondary level.

Continuing Professional Development can help to reduce the attainment gap

The evidence highlights three key challenges which confront attempts to close the attainment gap: the literacy challenge (the high level of parental illiteracy amongst vulnerable children); the schooling challenge (the inability of schools to address the attainment gap without support); and



the community challenge (vulnerable pupils are likely to have lower levels of parental engagement, cultural and social capital). CPD can help to address these issues but is not sufficient on its own. Closing the attainment gap requires a combination of other measures including parental and community engagement in programme design, committed and competent school leaders, and specific classroom based approaches to raising the attainment of children from low income households.

Arts education has the some potential to raise attainment in the most deprived schools

Following Professor Dai Smith's report, 'Arts in Education in the Schools of Wales', we reviewed the evidence about the effectiveness of arts education in improving literacy and numeracy and reducing the attainment gap. This suggests that there is a link between arts education and academic attainment but it is small and indirect. Involvement in the arts and creative teaching probably increase pupil engagement and motivation which has a positive effect on attainment. There is only limited research on the impact of arts education interventions on the attainment gap. Experts suggest that arts education may make the biggest contribution in the most deprived schools where pupil engagement and motivation are more of a problem, but their impact depends on the quality of interventions and external support is needed to equip teachers to be more creative.

[How to foster high quality vocational education in Wales](#)

Our report concluded that there is good practice across Wales but this is not being shared systematically to ensure that there is high quality provision in all colleges. It is important that colleges and employers work together to ensure that vocational education equips people for the kinds of work that is available. There is a need for effective CPD for lecturers and greater involvement of student representatives in governance and decision making.





Community use of school facilities has benefits but schools need incentives to engage

The international evidence shows that using school facilities to provide community based services can have a range of positive outcomes. Bringing services together in a single site can generate a cumulative 'community school effect', help address child poverty, and help mitigate cuts to council services. Wales already has examples of good practice but most schools have limited capacity to work in community contexts, so the Welsh Government needs to be clear about what it expects of them and put in place structures and incentives to encourage links to the world beyond their gates. Our report recommends the formation of a Task Group to stimulate increased use of school facilities across Wales.

Stakeholders are in favour of examining the impacts of asymmetric school weeks in Wales

While there is some anecdotal information, there is very little systematic research on the impact of asymmetric school week schedules. Participants in a specially convened PPIW workshop on the subject (including teaching unions, practitioners, the WLGA, governors, parents, regional consortia, Welsh Government officials and academic experts) expressed support for exploring the adoption of asymmetric school weeks in Wales; clarified some of the lessons that Wales can learn from Scottish experience; and helped to identify a set of key issues that would need to be addressed to maximise the benefits and manage the potential risks.

We look forward to working with Ministers, officials, Estyn, school leaders, teachers and others to continue to generate and disseminate robust evidence about these and other issues relating to education policy in order to help inform the implementation and evaluation of the programme of reforms that Wales will be realising over the next five years.