

EDUCATION, CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting of the Education, Children & Young People Scrutiny Panel held on Wednesday, 8 March 2023 at 5.00 pm at the Civic Offices, Portsmouth

Present

Councillor Ryan Brent (in the Chair)
Councillors Leo Madden
Dave Ashmore
John Smith
Judith Smyth
Reeder, Teachers Liaison Panel
Claire Haque, Parent Governor

14. Apologies for absence (AI 1)

Apologies had been received from Assheton Woodall, Headteacher of The Portsmouth Academy, who had been due to attend to give evidence today.

15. Declarations of interest (AI 2)

Councillor Brent declared a personal interest in that he is employed by the City of Portsmouth College.

16. Minutes of previous meeting - 22 February 2023 (AI 3)

RESOLVED that the minutes on 22 February 2023 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

17. Further information requested by the panel - Mike Stoneman (AI 5)

Mr Stoneman, Deputy Director Children, Families and Education - Education gave a brief outline of the information circulated to the panel which was information that is sent to all headteachers in the city. The data was provided using Studybugs which draws data from the school's management information systems to give live information on attendance, suspensions, de-registered children for elective home education (EHE) etc. It was a well understood, open and transparent document and provides useful intelligence which supports robust conversations between the LA and schools where there are attendance issues. Nationally absence rates are increasing and attendance figures increase moving through secondary school. High levels of suspensions are a concern in some schools, and some children are being suspended on multiple occasions. There has been good progress within primary schools but suspension rates remain too high and is one of the reasons why the LA is investing in relational practice. Those schools who have invested in relational practice have seen a drop in suspensions and an improvement in overall attendance. Children who are suspended are often the

most vulnerable children and are at risk of exploitation. It is incumbent on everyone to try and reduce suspensions. Mr Stoneman said that suspensions are tracked at different years and there is a rise in suspensions as go through secondary school. If there is a spike in suspensions, then officers will challenge the school as to the reasons.

Ms Chapman and Mr Vaughan felt that the Portsmouth commitment to the training around relational practice and encouraging all schools to participate and this could be transformational as has been seen at Trafalgar School where there is very clear evidence of improvements e.g., suspensions have been reduced to almost zero. It was noted that although suspensions was an important indicator a school could have low suspensions but still have bad behaviour within a school. Attendance needed to be looked at proactively to create a culture around restorative work that over time will require less punitive sanctions. It was felt that the situation post covid is uncharted territory and schools and the LA is learning constantly and there are many complex issues to address. It is very difficult to know when attendance would return to pre covid levels but all schools in the city have attendance as a priority. Ms Chapman added that since starting the relational practice model she had already seen improvement in her schools with children being able to regulate their emotions and conversations around repairing relationships. She felt the support from the LA was very good and are keen to learn from their experiences.

Mr Stoneman added that the LA are determined to improve attendance across the city. There were steady improvements in attendance before the pandemic however the impact of the pandemic has been profound across the country. Attendance is a priority within the PEP, is a priority in terms of the support from the Priority Education Investment Area (PEIA) and relational practice is a key strand within the attendance priority of the PEIA. Up to £0.5m from the PEIA will be supporting our work on school attendance with a particular focus on persistent and severely absent children. This will include a small expansion of the LA's school attendance team including a health specialist. Ms Robinson, Inclusion Manager added that poor attendance is the outcome of a number of different problems and she felt that the all partners needed also to look at the alternative provision offer. The LA has changed its language and now talk about 'distressed behaviours' rather than 'challenging behaviour' and this is where relational practice is very important. Every interaction is an intervention, every time you talk to a child you can do good or make things worse and this sits behind the relational practice. To get this embedded at Trafalgar School took a good number of years. A change programme is going to take at least another three years.

The LA is also seeing a rise in children who are electively home educated (EHE), although this is lower than national figures), and this is for a variety of reasons. The LA is concerned about this as they are aware that for many of those parents who decide to home educate it is often a challenge to provide suitable education. The LA have to determine whether that education is suitable and for many it is not and these children often return back into school.

Mr Vaughan said this was a good example of good collaborative working with the LA. When parents indicate that they wish to EHE, schools invite them in with the LA in an attempt to try and resolve any issues the parents might have with the school before they go down the path of EHE. It also provides the LA with an opportunity to inform parents about their responsibilities and the role of the LA in determining if home education is suitable. EHE can be very hard, and parents are often not equipped to do this. Ms Robinson said that where this is a concern about an unmet need and that this leading to a child not managing very well at school, that problems emerge and this may lead to poor absence and suspensions. The LA need to ensure that parents do not feel that EHE is the only alternative available to them if their child is struggling.

A school will involve child psychologists depending on the individual circumstances. This will normally be because they have tried to do an intervention that has not worked. It is always done in conjunction with re-admittance, reviewing a plan, welcoming a student back and wanting them to be successful. The overall majority of suspensions are for one day only.

18. Evidence from Anne H-Chapman, Executive Headteacher - ARK Ayrton Primary Academy and ARK Dickens Primary Academy (AI 7)

Ms Chapman said that attendance is a concern in both of her schools with overall attendance just below the national figure. ARK Ayrton mainly feeds into Charter Academy and ARK Dickens has a broader feed to various secondary schools in the city.

All secondary schools collect data around May for pupils that are due to move in September. Some secondary schools come to visit children in their primary schools. She felt the lack of visiting the children is an issue, data is transferred across, but this does not tell a story about the child, particularly vulnerable children, where transition to secondary school is a big deal and could potentially affect their attendance.

The pupils then have transition days which are generally held on the two agreed days in early July. She felt that previously there was more collaboration between primary and secondary schools and more flexibility if they felt that individual children needed more support around transition. Over time as more multi-academy trusts (MATs) have developed she felt that schools are working more towards what their MATs require and there is perhaps less collaboration. She did not feel that the MATs talk enough to each other to support transitions because they are all working with their own systems. There is however good work taking place across the city and they are working with Trafalgar School on the relational practice model.

Headteachers do all come together for LA meetings and transitions are sometimes discussed but there is not a lot of collaboration. Mr Stoneman, said that he agreed that collaborative working should be one of the priorities and there are good levels of collaboration, he referred to the recent Teaching and Learning conference organised by the PEP which focussed on literacy

which showed really good examples of work across the city and this was well attended. The MAT model was intended to have a small number of MATs to support transition however this had not materialised and there are now 14 MATs in the city. The LA had done a lot of work around this but more needs to be done particularly for the most vulnerable children.

ARK Dickens and ARK Ayrton schools have been very clear with the receiving secondary schools about the levels the children are working at. However, when they get to secondary school pupils are often taken back to a more basic level and the children get bored as they are not being challenged enough. She felt that secondary schools need to listen and understand the data and trust the SAT results. Helen Reeder, TLP rep added that she had heard of former pupils being tested on their transition days at secondary school to verify the results that their primary school had given them, which was not a good experience for the children. There needed to be more fluidity in schools so that secondary teachers are aware of what primary teachers are teaching and the high expectations of the children.

The relationship with Charter Academy was very good due to being in the same MAT. The music and PE teacher will visit the primary schools to deliver subject specific teaching which has benefited those children who have moved across to Charter Academy as they recognise the teachers. Children often struggle at secondary school with the amount of teachers for each subject. Year 6 pupils in her primary schools now have a different teacher for maths and another teacher for reading and they also move classrooms which starts to prepare them for secondary school where each lesson is in a different classroom.

From her experience she felt it was often the more vulnerable children who struggle more with the transition but there was an inconsistent approach about how flexible schools can be. They are aware that there are children that need more transition visits or more one to one support on transition days if they are particularly anxious and this information is fed across to secondary schools but this is not always acted upon. Ms Chapman said she would welcome a more collaborative approach to get the package of support right, particularly for more vulnerable children as this is often where attendance is more of a concern. They are supportive to seeing their children through and will visit them, provide support and not step away until they are comfortable that their children are settled into their secondary school. Primary schools have built up a relationship with families which secondary schools will not have had chance to do yet so she felt primary schools could help to bridge this relationship and help to formulate a plan for those children. It was important to take the time to build relationships with families and this needed to be prioritised.

In response to a question, Ms Chapman said when it came to attendance there is a policy and support from ARK but they understand that the school is a Portsmouth school and are working closely with the LA and partners. ARK support them with the strategy but there is not a conflict.

In terms of vulnerable children Ms Chapman would classify those children who are persistently absent, children on child protection plans, children who are at risk or permanent exclusion, children with SEMH needs and children who are school refusers. Numbers vary from cohort to cohort. Mr Stoneman said that the LA link co-ordinators work with all schools and track and monitor vulnerable young people, this is agreed by schools and they are RAG rated. Mr Vaughan said this was an outstanding success during the pandemic as there was a danger that these children would become very isolated however twice weekly conversations took place with the LA link co-ordinators about their vulnerable pupils which established good collaborative working. The LA has invested in this resource so it was able to continue post pandemic. Gathering information about vulnerable students is integral part of this. Mr Vaughan said they try to make transition a process over a few months and SENCOs will go out to collaborate with primary schools in advance. The aim is to create an environment where the universal offer will hit that middle ground of pupils who have the potential to become vulnerable and in parallel to that there are the individual support plans for those children who the LA and school know are vulnerable.

When asked what more they felt the LA could do Ms Chapman said more roles available to help support children with transitions such as family link workers and more support in school when needed.

19. Evidence from Stewart Vaughan - Headteacher - Priory Secondary School (AI 8)

Mr Vaughan said the transition process at Priory School will start 12 months before a child arrives at the school with the open evening process which provides reassurance and information to parents and pupils. Up to 31 October parents can have a tour of the school and meet with Mr Vaughan and the leadership team. From 1 March the school have their list of students for September and there is a designated member of staff whose role is transition. There are three main feeder schools to Priory but they take pupils from up to 15 different schools which can be a challenge in terms of receiving data. The leadership team will go out to the three main feeder schools to have face to face conversations with pupils - ideally they would go out to all schools but resources are finite.

In terms of transition days the majority of schools in the city do the two days in early July. These are designed around pastoral priorities and pupils are not tested on these days. Pupils are asked at the end of the two days how they are feeling with the aim that they are enthusiastic and excited to start secondary school. The meetings with parents at the end of the induction process are relational with the intention to find out about the child and the dynamic of the family.

In July summer camps are held, inviting children to come in to increase bonds and provide a sense of orientation. The government started this initiative and the school decided to continue with this and subsidise this for pupils. The school will use the data sent from the primary schools to identify the

potentially vulnerable families and they are targeted for this initially before opening it up to all.

On the first day of term year 7 are the only year group in order to help with the transition, and within three weeks of the start of term the school hold a tutor evening when parents can meet with tutors to find out how things have been going. Tutors are the first point of call for pupils as they see pupils each day. A report is provided in the autumn term on how each pupil is settling to inform parents. Tests around literacy and reading ages are carried out to provide a useful baseline but Mr Vaughan said that school trust the SAT results given to them from primary schools and they will set a plan based on those results.

The SENCo and special needs team are vital in carrying out additional visits to ensure those pupils who require have additional care and support. If resources were infinite Mr Vaughan would like to see more resources for this wraparound care and a team of primary phonics experts to support and to give a clear link from primary school up until the end of year 7. He felt they would see a huge increase in engagement, attendance and outcomes as literacy is key.

He added that their MAT is clear that they have a local curriculum; an example of this is that they start with Macbeth in year 7 as the majority of the feeder schools do this in year 6 so it is a natural progression. The school are keen to do more work on curriculum transition. He felt where it sometimes fails is when students need an EHCP and perhaps the assessment has not been done in year 6. He felt though that overall the collaborative working was very good with the primary schools.

In response to a question Mr Vaughan said that his school do monitor the number of parents who come to parents' evenings. They also recognise that sometimes different approaches need to be taken such as going out to parents' homes. The beginnings of a relationship with parents is established within the first 2-3 weeks of their child starting school, some parents are immediately trusting and some relationships take time to build. In terms of working with parents where English is not their first language he felt that the EMAS service is excellent and provides support to parents; typically parents are very keen to get their child into school.

Ms Robinson, Inclusion Manager, said that if the problem is an unidentified SEN then that should be addressed and there is a graduated response of doing that under the SEN code of practice which all schools have signed up to. There is also SEN support and then EHCP so there is a very robust system in place for moderating those requests that come in. Other vulnerable children might need support and need alternative provision to cater for a different vulnerability that is not a SEN. There is good inter-agency working and schools are very good at identifying who they need to get support for either through a psychologist, MABSS, the inclusion outreach service which involves therapists and specialists from Solent Academies Trust, however there are children who sometimes fall through the gaps. The best time to intervene is as soon as the LA or school starts to see attendance starting to drop. 97% of EHCP assessment requests in Portsmouth are agreed which is

more than the majority of LAs in the region, due to having a robust system in place for moderating and agreeing requests.

Mr Vaughan said that the multi-agency work in the city is excellent. Sometimes pupils need to be told that they are alright and they do not need that support but professional skills are needed to do that.

Mr Vaughan says that headteachers talk anecdotally about what each school is doing and through the PEP there are collaborations which helps to glean what other schools are doing better. He did not feel his school were doing anything radical but just being as supportive as they are able.

In terms of facilitation of curriculum transition and supporting the transfer of data, Mr Stoneman felt that the LA has a role to play and could perhaps do more to support that under the remit of the PEP.

The meeting concluded at 6.35 pm.

Councillor Ryan Brent
Chair