

Education and Lifelong Learning Committee ELL(2) 05-03(min)

Minutes

Date: Thursday 16 October 2003

Time: 2.00pm - 4.00pm

Venue: Committee Room 2, National Assembly for Wales, Cardiff Bay

Members

Constituency

Peter Black (Chair)	South Wales West
Lorraine Barrett	Cardiff South and Penarth
Jeff Cuthbert	Caerphilly
David Davies	Monmouth
Jocelyn Davies	South Wales East
Mark Isherwood	North Wales
Denise Idris Jones	Conwy
Tamsin Dunwoody- Kneafsey	Preseli Pembrokeshire
Owen John Thomas	South West Central

Officials

Alan Lansdown	Head, Pupil Support Division, Department for Training and Education
Mair Watkins	Pupil Support Division, Department for Training and Education

In Attendance:

Susan Lewis	Her Majesty's Chief Inspector for Training and Education in Wales, Estyn
Hilary Anthony	Head of Inspection Division, Estyn
Sue Willan	HMI
Rhiannedd Pratley	Executive Director for Wales, Basic Skills Agency
Pat Davies	Assistant Director for Wales, Basic Skills Agency
Colin Mock	Welsh Initiative for Conductive Education

Committee Secretariat

Chris Reading	Clerk
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Holly Pembridge
Ruth Hatton

Deputy Clerk
Committee Support Officer

Item One: Introduction, apologies, substitutions and declarations of interest

1.1 The Chair welcomed the Committee and members of the public.

1.2 The Chair noted apologies from Helen Mary Jones, the Minister and Leighton Andrews. Jocelyn Davies, Tamsin Dunwoody-Kneafsey and Lorraine Barrett substituted respectively.

1.3 There were no declarations of interest in accordance with standing order 4.5.

Item Two: Policy Review of Special Educational Needs - Information Gathering Papers: ELL(2) 05-03(p.1), (p.2) and (p.3)

2.1 Presenters from Estyn and the Basic Skills Agency spoke to their papers using PowerPoint presentations. Colin Mock spoke to his paper and the Committee viewed a video 'Miracles Do Happen' which conveyed practical examples of conductive education practised in the classroom.

2.2 The Chair then invited Members to question presenters and the following issues were raised in discussion:

Early Learning Centres

It was felt that more of these should be held in schools to ensure participation by parents. There was general agreement on the need for parents to be made welcome at these centres.

Early Detection of Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Members linked the fact that a high proportion of children starting school was unprepared for learning and that this affected their development/progress in their later education. The Committee was told that there was a large body of research, which indicated the effectiveness of early support from parents.

Mainstream Versus Special Schools

There was some discussion concerning the merit of teaching pupils with SEN in mainstream schools as opposed to special schools. Members were told that the teaching of SEN pupils could be very effective in mainstream schools, assuming that there were sufficient resources in place, i.e. classrooms and specialist staff. Special schools were particularly effective in supporting pupils with severe SEN. Colin Mock said that it was important that parents should be consulted on the decision as to which school their child and/or children attended.

Conductive Education

Members asked what age children started receiving conductive therapy and what the duration of this treatment was. Colin Mock replied that his school prepared children for nursery and primary school. Children could attend from as young as the age of one. The duration of a child's stay varied typically between one and three years. Colin Mock emphasised that conductive education was an important intervention in helping SEN pupils prepare for mainstream schooling.

Statementing Process

Members raised a number of questions concerning the statementing process. Some Members questioned the benefits of the current process. It was felt that this caused undue stress on parents and pupils and seldom revealed more information about a child's needs than was already known. Also, it was considered to be costly both in financial terms (£7m per annum) and in the use of professional staff. It was felt that the money and specialist staff could be used more effectively and efficiently if the statementing process was abandoned. Reference was made to a report published by the Audit Commission, on this issue, which supported these views. Whilst acknowledging the weaknesses of the current system, some Members nevertheless felt that statements provided some reassurance to parents that their children would receive the appropriate support. Presenters from Estyn said that they would be reviewing the statementing process, particularly the discrepancies in the differing volumes of statements between Local Education Authorities (LEAs). Estyn intended to publish its report before the end of the financial year.

Support for Parents with SEN

Presenters from the Basic Skills Agency confirmed that Social Services and various charitable organisations primarily provided family centres. They were usually found in disadvantaged housing estates, urban areas and some rural areas across Wales. Some Members felt that schools were in a good position to provide advice to parents of children with SEN.

Inspection Framework

Members supported the proposals for the new inspection arrangements referred to in Estyn's paper. These would be in place from September 2004.

Speech Therapists

Members and presenters agreed that there were insufficient speech therapists to meet demand in Wales. Presenters from Estyn said it was difficult for some LEAs to guarantee sufficient access to speech therapists and other professionals. Colin Mock said that there was a tendency for some LEAs to target statements at existing resources which did not necessarily meet the needs of a child.

Support Staff

Presenters from Estyn stated that more use could be made of learning support assistants to implement special educational provision under the direction of specialist staff such as speech therapists.

Pilot Project

There was some support from Committee Members for a proposed pilot project on Conductive Education to be funded by the Assembly.

Funding

David Davies asked whether LEAs could use the statementing process to attract more funding for their schools. Estyn presenters replied that the number of statements issued by a LEA would not increase the overall funding available for SEN but could affect the distribution of monies between schools. The Chair commented that in some schools, when SEN had been identified by Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs), it had appeared that LEAs did not always provide the appropriate support due to financial pressures.

Assessment Criteria

Jeff Cuthbert felt that there was a lack of common assessment criteria and asked if there were examples of best practice in this area. Presenters agreed that assessment should be a continuous process rather than at discreet points in time. It was generally felt that there was a need to agree common assessment criteria and performance indicators. Members felt that performance indicators should reflect different degrees of SEN.

Non-detection of SEN

There was some concern that, due to the lack of commonly agreed assessment criteria, too many children with moderate, emotional and behavioural SEN were not being detected. It was felt that the failure to identify these needs and to intervene in sufficient time was causing severe problems for these pupils and their classmates as they progressed through the education system; this sometimes contributed to anti-social behaviour later in life.

'Children Who Don't Fit In' Conference

Mark Isherwood informed the Committee that he had attended an interesting conference earlier in the day on 'Children Who Don't Fit In', in Cardiff. He briefly referred to some of the issues raised at this conference and undertook to provide a brief report on this for the Committee in due course. The conference addressed several points relevant to the Committee's policy review on SEN.

Bullying

Colin Mock stated that although bullying was a general problem in school, it was particularly severe for pupils with SEN, who were readily identified targets. Estyn presenters said that all LEAs and schools had to develop anti-bullying strategies and inspectors were being trained to delve deeper into this subject by speaking with a broad range of pupils. This would help them gain an insight into what it was like to be a pupil at the school being inspected. The point was also made that those carrying out the bullying often had SEN themselves.

Item Three: Minutes of the previous meetings

Paper: ELL(2) 04-03(min)

3.1 Members ratified the minutes of the previous meeting.