
THE REINTEGRATION OF CHILDREN ABSENT, EXCLUDED OR MISSING FROM SCHOOL

GHK Consulting, The Holden McAllister Partnership and IPSOS Public Affairs

Background

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned GHK Consulting to undertake research to examine current reintegration practices amongst LEAs, schools and their partners, describing differences in practice and identifying the elements that determine successful reintegration. An initial survey of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) was carried out followed by detailed case studies in 14 LEAs.

A series of pupil groups were studied who displayed a range of reintegration needs, including changes in education delivery, support to maintain a place in school, help to catch-up after interrupted education, support after a change in circumstances, and help to secure a school place for the first time (this being more a case of integration than reintegration). A diverse range of pupil groups were studied: permanently excluded pupils; pupils with persistent unauthorised absences; pupils not attending school due to medical needs, caring responsibilities (including school age parents) and extended absences (such as term-time holidays); and pupils with mobility issues, including - Gypsy/Traveller children, children in local authority care, and asylum seeker and refugee children.

Key Findings

- Specific, formalised approaches to reintegration were most commonly reported for permanently excluded pupils, pupils with medical needs and children in local authority care. They were least commonly reported for pupils with caring responsibilities and pupils taking extended authorised absences.
- No single approach emerged as a 'blueprint' for effective reintegration, and while for some reintegration may be straightforward others may face a range of complex and interlinked challenges. A plethora of flexible and tailored approaches and interventions were identified which sought to meet the needs of pupils with different characteristics, circumstances and needs.
- The main conclusion of the study was that successful reintegration occurs in an environment where the appropriate culture of inclusion, degree of commitment and appropriate resources are in place to support it. In certain cases, multi-agency responses will be required to meet particularly complex needs and deliver multi-faceted solutions.

Aims

The aims of the study were to identify best practice in, and make recommendations for, the reintegration of different pupil groups into mainstream school. The more specific objectives of the study were to:

- Determine what reintegration strategies and approaches are being used and how they differ according to the circumstances of absence.
- Determine how reintegration practices differ across LEAs and schools, and assess the relative impact and effectiveness of different approaches.

- Examine and identify the elements that determine successful reintegration - including procedures and protocols, multi-agency operations, time and cost issues and pupil characteristics (including age and reasons for absence).
- Make recommendations for best practice in reintegration at all levels and for different groups of children, including changes to government practice, based on measurable success criteria.

Background

Pupils may be missing from mainstream school for a variety of reasons, and while for some the return to school may be straightforward for others it poses a series of potentially complex and interlinked challenges. While recognising that a return to school may not be appropriate for all pupils (with alternative or vocational provision being better suited to meet their needs), the study focused on the approaches followed by LEAs and their partners to return pupils to the mainstream school setting.

The study was set against a recent context of change in education policy, and a series of wider developments affecting approaches towards children and young people more widely. These included:

- Changes in the school sector, such as shifts in responsibilities between LEAs and schools for different aspects of school management, increased specialisation at secondary level, initiatives to improve behaviour and attendance, and a focus on promoting inclusion supported by targeted funding in areas of most need.
- Changes in funding arrangements, such as the introduction of the Vulnerable Children Grant (VCG), the increased delegation of funding to school level, and the discontinuation of the Pupil Retention Grant.
- New developments in services for children and young people, such as the introduction of the Children's Fund and Connexions Service, targeted approaches to address youth offending and drug and alcohol use within a framework of Local Preventative Strategies, and an emphasis on multi-agency and preventative work including family support.

As the result of these changes, as well as other drivers such as legislation, DfES guidance, and responses to OfSTED inspections, a number of the services examined in the study had been recently introduced or only in place for a short period of time.

Methodology

A combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches were followed in the study, the key elements of which were:

- A postal survey of all 150 LEAs in England - to establish the extent to which LEAs have 'specific, formalised approaches' to the reintegration of pupils from the different pupil groups, and to determine the characteristics of these approaches. The response rate was 60%.
- Case study fieldwork in 14 LEA areas, selected on the basis of responses to the survey and to ensure a range of practice was investigated - to examine approaches to reintegration in more detail through qualitative interviews with LEA staff, schools, pupils and parents/carers and key local 'reintegration partners'.

Results

The LEA survey identified the degree to which LEAs had formalised approaches to reintegrating pupils from the different pupil groups. It also found that:

- LEAs and schools drew on a **range of funding** to support reintegration, most commonly mainstream budgets but also the VCG, other Standards Fund monies and a range of other sources. The introduction of the VCG has led to the development of a series of new services, although practitioners raised concerns over time limited funding more broadly.
- **Monitoring of the effectiveness** of reintegration activities was highly variable both between and within LEAs, and despite the majority reporting having monitoring approaches in place fewer than half provided reintegration data.
- A **range of reintegration approaches** were described for the different pupil groups, including dedicated teams and specific mechanisms including off-site centres/Pupil Referral Units, externally provided services, multi-agency planning and service provision, personal education plans and

flexible approaches to timetables and the curriculum.

The LEA case studies allowed many of the issues raised in the LEA survey to be examined in more detail, and identified:

- A range of barriers to effective reintegration, including:
 - **School-based barriers** - such as the reluctance to accept certain pupils, insufficient support resources and the lack of alternative options/insufficient flexibility in the application of the curriculum.
 - **Contact and communication barriers** - such as unclear roles and responsibilities, and ineffective communications between reintegration partners.
 - **External barriers** - such as a lack of parent/carer support, poor initial assessment and poor reintegration planning.
- A series of key success factors for effective reintegration for LEAs and schools, grouped by 'environmental' (representing the context and conditions necessary for foster effective practice) and 'practical' factors (more closely related to the content and setting of particular interventions).
- **'Environmental' success factors** included:
 - Inclusive LEA and school cultures.
 - Responding to needs and promoting inclusion.
 - The availability of appropriate support services.
 - Staff attitude, skills and awareness.
- **'Practical' success factors** included:
 - Effective and informed planning and consultation.
 - High quality information collection and the monitoring of individual pupils.
 - Providing individually tailored, flexible approaches.
 - Securing school places/retaining pupils on roll.
 - Maintaining contact with schools, parents and pupils.
- Key success factors were also identified for the **effective involvement of reintegration partners and stakeholders**, including:

- Ensuring that responsibilities are appropriately shared, understood and owned by different partners.
- Documenting and formalising approaches and shared strategies.
- The development of multi-agency approaches and mechanisms for collaborative working.

Summary of Key Recommendations

A series of recommendations were produced for the DfES, LEAs and schools, including:

- **For DfES** - to identify mechanisms for reducing both perceived and actual disincentives to reintegrating pupils, encourage the exchange of practice and experience between practitioners, and promote training/awareness raising around reintegration needs as part of Inset and initial teacher training.
- **For LEAs** - to develop shared definitions of inclusion with schools, to foster an inclusive ethos to ensure reintegrating pupils are equitably distributed between schools, and consider establishing data collection systems to support reintegration planning and enhance effectiveness.
- **For schools** - to ensure they are meeting pupil needs by: providing positive welcomes for returning pupils, developing 'whole school' approaches to inclusion and reintegration, providing named reintegration contacts and identifying how local services and resources can best be marshalled to support pupil reintegration.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (RR598) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".

Copies of this Research Brief (RB598) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Liz Ison, 6D7, DfES, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

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