

1. INTRODUCTION

Between **September 2007** and **February 2008**, Ofsted undertook a survey of 29 secondary schools, including one academy and one pupil referral unit, selected because they had shown a decrease in unauthorised absences between 2004 and 2006 and had a record of sustained good practice in re-engaging disaffected students in their learning. The report illustrates the good practice in the schools visited and what might be achieved by others when reviewing support for disaffected students. The report emphasises the importance of also engaging parents and carers in supporting young people.

The survey defined disaffected students as those who displayed one or more of the following characteristics:

- regularly non-compliant, but not aggressive or threatening, and causing repeated low-level disruptions.
- regularly disruptive, challenging or both, leading to repeated entries in the school's incident log, recurring fixed-term exclusions or both.
- absence for 20% or more of the available school sessions in the year.
- quiet and withdrawn and uninterested in most lessons.

2. KEY FINDINGS

These features were common in the secondary schools that were successful in helping disaffected students to begin to enjoy learning again:

- The staff shared a commitment to helping the students succeed, which they expressed clearly to students and their families. The school ethos valued and respected the needs of individuals. The students felt part of the school.
- Robust monitoring of academic, personal and social progress, and close collaboration with primary schools and other services for children and young people ensured that students who were likely to become disaffected were identified early. They received appropriate support before and after they entered secondary school.
- Teaching assistants provided vital support for individuals, helping them to maintain their interest and cope successfully with any crises. This allowed teachers to focus on teaching the whole class. *[See also Section 3 below].*
- Pastoral support was managed by assigned support staff. They acted as the first point of contact for all parents and carers and they directed them to the most appropriate member of staff if they could not deal with the issue themselves.
- Communication with students and their families was very effective. It ensured that they were fully involved in the process and had confidence in the decisions that were made. Students knew they were listened to and felt they could contribute to decisions about their future. Home-school liaison staff played a critical role.
- Specific support, such as temporary withdrawal from classes and training in life skills to help students change their attitudes and improve their learning, was very effective.
- At Key Stage 4, a high-quality, flexible curriculum, involving a range of accredited training providers outside the school, was effective in engaging students more in their learning. *[See also Section 3 below].*

Some of the schools surveyed felt that significant delays from specialist services, such as child and adolescent mental health services, had contributed to students' continuing disengagement.

The report contains several vignettes of good practice in the schools surveyed and some instructive comments from students themselves. It also points out that, *'Among the boys, disengagement led to high levels of **disruptive or challenging behaviour**. For the girls, it led to very high levels of **absence** (41% compared with 22% among boys). Girls' absence from school and the reasons for it have been largely overlooked in research literature. The survey's findings suggest an urgent need for a greater focus on this area'*.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The **Department for Children, Schools and Families** should:

- undertake research into the extent to which girls fall out of the education system and the reasons for this;
- liaise with the Department of Health to ascertain the availability, promptness of service response and quality of child and adolescent mental health services for young people.

Secondary schools should:

- monitor academic, personal and social progress consistently and regularly so that students at risk of disengagement are identified early;
- work with primary schools to identify students at risk of disengagement and develop intervention strategies to support them;
- establish flexible systems to communicate with disaffected students, their parents and carers, and the agencies supporting them;
- work closely with the parents and carers of disaffected students and make them aware of students' successes as well as the areas where they need to improve;
- use the full range of internal and external resources from the local authority and its partners.

3. SELECTED POINTS OF INTEREST

Support staff

- The report says: *A key strength of the schools in the survey was their recruitment and deployment of support staff. They chose staff from a wide range of backgrounds. They looked for key attributes such as patience, willingness not to pre-judge children, firmness, consistent approaches, high thresholds of tolerance and willingness to give students a second chance. They found that support staff recruited from the local community were particularly effective in breaking down the barriers between home and school. Because students and their families did not view these staff as part of the local authority's social services provision, or as teachers, they said they found them less intimidating. One such member of staff said, 'Teachers in mainstream schools are successes of the education system but this isn't necessarily valued by disengaged students. They align themselves more with staff who have other life skills and experiences.'* In at least one school, the term '*support specialist*' is deliberately used to imply importance and status.

Personalised curriculum

- All the schools in the survey adapted the curriculum to meet the specific needs of their students. At Key Stage 3, this most commonly involved the use of carefully chosen reading schemes, nurture groups, quality circle time and materials relating to the social and emotional aspects of learning. *[Website references provided]*.
- At Key Stage 4, the quality of the curriculum was better than at Key Stage 3 because greater use of alternative education and training establishments created more flexibility in the curriculum and a better match to students' needs.
- All the schools used different forms of accreditation to give the students a sense of achievement. To help raise students' self-esteem and increase their motivation, courses were practical in nature and included *[website references provided]*:
 - ASDAN Certificate of Personal Effectiveness
 - adult literacy and adult numeracy qualifications
 - TALENT4Life (a range of courses for students under the age of 16)
 - Stride courses for staff working with pupils with special educational needs.

The full report can be viewed/downloaded at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk> > Entering 070255 in the Search field.