Education welfare: at the crossroads?

Ken Reid presents some of the key findings from a survey of 431 education welfare officers in England and Wales undertaken in late 2004 and early 2005, and in-depth interviews with 59 of the respondents. The findings show the difficulties under which many education welfare staff operate, their disillusionment with existing court sanctions and with their own lack of initial and professional development opportunities. It is suggested that a review of the education welfare service is needed if a consistent application of provision to schools is to be achieved. Until then, the service with prime responsibility for raising pupils’ attendance may continue to struggle.

Background

The role of the education welfare/social work service tends to vary from authority to authority throughout the UK (SIHE, 2005; NFER, 2006). Until 15 or 20 years ago, the service tended only to deal with the issue of pupils’ non-attendance. Today, some teams deal with a full range of complex and interrelated tasks. These include managing exclusion, child protection, antisocial behaviour, licensing and child employment, parenting orders, criminal review board checks, alternative curriculum and out-of-school placements, health and safety, risk assessments, responsibility for travellers’ children and asylum seekers, aspects of special needs provision, as well as truancy and other forms of non-attendance.

The extent and organisation of the education welfare service also tends to vary from one local authority (LA) to another (Wilkin et al., 2003). For example, in some LAs, education welfare officers (EWOs) are based in schools. In others, they are not. In some, primary intervention teams operate. In others, the service is predominantly secondary orientated. Moreover, burgeoning legislation has meant that the role of the education welfare service has become increasingly paper driven. Writing reports, making home visits and taking parent(s) to court has become much more complicated. All of this has meant that some schools and headteachers tend to perceive they get a better deal from their education welfare service through their local service agreement than others.

This position needs to be put into perspective. Pupils who do not attend school regularly are much more likely to leave with few or no qualifications. They are also more likely to be drawn into crime and antisocial behaviour and in adult life depict a range of social pathologies (Reid, 1999). Truants, for example, are the most probable post-school group to become fully dependent upon the state through such schemes as housing benefit and income support. One recent study estimates that every truant will eventually cost the taxpayer a quarter of a million pounds during his or her adult life (Boyle and Goodall, 2005a, b).

However, whilst the Government is trying hard to reduce truancy and other forms of non-attendance from school, the agency whose prime responsibility it is within LAs does not think that these sanctions are working. Moreover, they are feeling professionally demeaned. Yet, these staff are crucial in implementing the Children Act (Reid, 2005a).
The survey

In order to ascertain the views of education welfare officers/education social workers in England and Wales a questionnaire was completed by 431 of them in late 2004 and early 2005. Of these, 59 officers (13.7 per cent) provided information obtained from in-depth semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire focused upon selected issues, including the personal continuing professional development (CPD) training that individual officers had received. Based on their own experiences, the staff were asked to select the four most serious issues from a list of 29 that made managing school attendance particularly difficult. They were asked to select the best solution to improve pupils’ attendance based on their perception of court action taken against parents or carers. Amongst a range of other issues, they were also asked which professional is in the best position to help pupils like truants and absentees to reintegrate back into school.

The findings obtained from this survey are particularly revealing and interesting, not least because it is the first project to examine some of the sensitive issues involved. The findings also reveal that it is proving extremely difficult to ensure that action taken in magistrates’ courts support the endeavours made by schools, LAs and education welfare teams when parent(s) are brought to court for their children’s non-attendance.

A clear majority of EWOs do not believe that existing court sanctions work effectively. For example, only 4 per cent of them consider that jailing parents is a worthwhile remedy. Even fewer have any confidence in the use of existing education supervision or attendance orders. They are equally sceptical about the benefits of parenting orders, anti-social behaviour orders or the use of spot fines. Education welfare officers consider the failure of courts to implement worthwhile penalties in non-attendance cases is now causing headteachers and teachers to lose confidence in their professional ability.

In fact, rather than punishing parent(s) through the courts, a majority of EWOs consider that the best solution lies in providing disaffected pupils with appropriate alternative or vocational curriculum programmes in order to facilitate both their learning and attendance. At present, the rigidity of the National Curriculum, the lack of a consistently applied alternative curriculum and the intense pressure on out-of-school places mean that EWOs are frequently attempting to readjust and/or reintegrate pupils back into a school system that they have already rejected. Reid (2003), for example, has found that the provision of a supportive out-of-school learning programme has been very beneficial in raising attendance, improving behaviour as well as in raising attainment. Presently, most primary and secondary schools throughout the UK use a wide range of short- and long-term strategies to improve school attendance (Reid, 2002).

Impediments to improving school attendance

The EWOs were also very clear about what is handicapping them from having a significant impact in improving attendance rates in England and Wales. In their view, parent(s) taking pupils out of school for holidays during term time and/or condoning their children’s absence are the two most significant reasons for not only their own difficulties but those of school staff.

Apart from parents condoning absence and taking their children out of school for term time holidays, the officers consider there are
other significant impediments that are hindering overall rises in school attendance. These include the extent of post-registration truancy and specific lesson absences in some schools, pupils’ low self-esteem and low expectations, the local culture, history or socioeconomic catchment area of the school, the extent of bullying in some schools, poor teacher–pupil relationships and high rates of underachievement and illiteracy. Perhaps surprisingly, poor teaching did not emerge as a major issue.

**Initial training and professional development needs**

The survey found that the extent of initial training and professional development training for education welfare staff is extremely varied from authority to authority. In some cases, initial training is scarce, even non-existent. For example, some education welfare staff are former police officers, youth workers or teachers. Others are much younger embarking on a new, challenging career. Within some LAs, EWOs are expected to have obtained social work-accredited qualifications prior to commencement or through in-house schemes (e.g. Diploma in Education Welfare). In others, no formal pre-qualifications apply. Whereas 20 years ago, education social work was a male-dominated profession, this is no longer the case. Men now only predominate in the over-55 age category. Over 90 per cent of the under-35 age group are women.

A worrying finding from the detailed interviews was the number who revealed significant deficits in their professional development needs even for the management of daily tasks. For example, an overwhelming majority believed they had been insufficiently well trained to manage the implementation of the Children Act, Human Rights Act, Crime and Disorder Act, Freedom of Information Act and Anti-Social Behaviour Act. More than a third had received ‘no’ or ‘little’ training on the Data Protection Act, Race Relations Act or Disability Act. Other areas of professional development deficits ranged from the use of a laptop to fields such as special educational needs, managing exclusions and/or parenting orders to risk assessment, report writing skills and establishing interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary networks.

All education welfare staff tends to suffer from a similar training disadvantage. Currently, there are few national training qualifications available either at diploma or degree level. There are a lucky few such as those from the midlands consortium who have been chosen and supported to study...
the Diploma in Education Social Work at Nottingham Trent University on a part-time basis. However, the reality is that a clear majority of existing staff within some LAs are professionally unqualified (Reid, 2005b; SIHE, 2003, 2004, 2005). Therefore, the National Association of Social Workers in Education (NASWE) has been urging the Government to introduce a programme of national occupational standards to ensure consistency of practice throughout the UK.

Workloads

Education welfare staff believe their workloads have increased significantly in recent years as schools and LAs attempt to meet government-imposed targets both for authorised and unauthorised absence and for reducing exclusions. In some LAs it is not unusual for individual officers to have potential caseloads ranging upwards of 2000 to 5000 pupils or more. Put another way, this could mean having responsibility for two, three, four or more secondary schools and all their feeder primaries with all the travelling-time involved. Consequently, staff feel that too few LA teams are sufficiently focused upon primary school intervention and other forms of preventative work. In particular, many of them believe they are engaged in fire-fighting exercises with persistent non-attenders in years 10 and 11.

The role of EWOs is, to some extent, also becoming confused with the growth of the number of paraprofessionals working within schools. Apart from Connexions personal advisers, Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zone staff, many secondary and primary schools benefit from having their own school-based learning mentors, home-school liaison officers, attendance support staff, classroom assistants, social inclusion and special needs staff and, in a few more extreme cases, police officers. All of these support staff can be engaged in either making home visits or endeavouring to facilitate non-attendance issues. In some LAs, there is currently a lack of clarity about when to refer a pupil’s non-attendance to the education welfare service.

Herein lies another issue. In some LAs, staff are paid on social work grades; in others they are not. At the basic scale, for doing the same work, it is not unusual for staff in one authority to be paid up to £15,000 more for doing the same job as a colleague in another authority. At Principal EWO level, one study found the salary range varied from £26,000 to £55,000 (SIHE, 2005).

Evidence from interviews

Some of the most interesting data was obtained from the in-depth interviews with 59 selected EWOs in England and Wales. The interviews revealed that education welfare staff are concerned about the perceived increase in the extent of alleged incidents of bullying. Very often, these acts of bullying took place within the community or on the way to and from schools. Despite this, schools are often wrongly blamed for specific incidents. Some officers were concerned about the perceived growth in e-bullying (particularly through the use of mobile phones and other forms of new technology) and of psychological bullying, especially amongst girls.

Some EWOs feel that local magistrates and their clerks need better training on attendance issues. They also consider that it would be beneficial if teachers and members of their own profession were involved in these dialogues. They also consider that the implementation of some parenting orders are too parent-friendly. They believe that if more of these orders inconvenienced uncooperative parents during their free social time (e.g. at weekends), this may lead to better outcomes.

Many EWOs consider that some parents or carers are really struggling to bring up their children properly due to deprivation, poverty and disadvantage. They believe therefore, that
the provision of better-focused support for needy parents would be of considerable advantage to society and schools alike, and would be within the spirit of the Children Act.

A significant minority of EWOs reported that making home visits was proving increasingly difficult. Some staff are now provided with alarms or not allowed to visit except in pairs or with a police escort. Although no incidents of physical abuse were reported, several staff stated that verbal abuse was becoming the norm. Therefore, within some LAs, some staff were now refusing to visit certain homes or to travel to particular estates on their own. Education welfare officers tend to feel that the Government needs to do more to address the wider social and socioeconomic causes of pupils’ non-attendance, otherwise its consequences will continue to escalate (cf NAO, 2005; Boyle and Goodall, 2005a, b).

Furthermore, one in five EWOs now consider that resources available within LAs to tackle truancy, absenteeism and related issues are often too scarce for them to be successful. For example, pressure on places for pupil referral units, out-of-school provision and alternative curriculum schemes is huge in some LAs and, in others, either limited or non-existent. Many EWOs feel that many schools need to be provided with more consistent and sustained support by their service. This includes more and better support for primary schools, many of whom in different parts of the country receive little or no support from their EWS. Staff consider that too many EWS teams are crisis orientated, too focused, and intervene much too late, often when pupils are in years 9, 10 or 11. Most staff believe that earlier intervention is required, especially at the initial stage when pupils start to skip school. Once pupils reach the persistent stage, it is generally much too late.

Despite all these difficulties, a majority of EWOs consider that they remain in the best position to help truants to readjust back to school. However, they also believe that their lack of numbers and large caseloads militate against their profession being very effective.

Perhaps significantly, education welfare staff depicted a tendency to be sceptical that staff in schools could fulfil their pastoral responsibilities with truants and non-attenders. They consider there is often a natural conflict between the pastoral and disciplinary responsibilities of staff within schools. Interestingly, they also believe that form tutors, learning mentors (particularly), home-school liaison officers and heads of year are in a better position to help reintegrate pupils back into schools than more senior staff such as headteachers and deputys. This finding is revealing, as Ofsted (2003, 2004, 2005) consider that schools in the Excellence in Cities initiative, and those with learning mentors, are leading the drive upwards to improve attendance rates.

Education welfare officers are almost universally in favour of inclusion policies, believing these are in the best interests of schools, the pupils and the state. They are concerned, however, about the rising levels of absenteeism in some primary schools and in years 9 and 10.

**Practical implications for schools and teachers**

Managing attendance within schools is undergoing significant change partly due to the implementation of the Children Act 2004. This requires professionals to manage issues such as child abuse, bullying, disruptive behaviour and pupils’ non-attendance with a consistent interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach that includes the sharing of records and use of appropriate case conferences. Intervention should be implemented as early as possible and will become increasingly focused upon primary
schools. The Government is planning much more specialist support for children and families in need. However, non-conformist parents face tougher action through, for example, the use of parenting orders in those cases where parent(s) are condoning a child’s truancy, anti-social or offending behaviour. Schools and LAs will become gradually more accountable for their actions. Major workforce reform, improved professional training and the development of a common assessment framework across the full range of services for children are also being developed. Many LAs are in the process of reorganising their health and education departments into one unified service for children. Implementing the full range of recommendations within the Children Act will prove a considerable challenge both for schools and LAs (Reid, 2005a).

It is also bound to prove a major challenge to the education welfare/social work profession. This is partly because the role of education welfare will need to fit into the range of children’s support services offered to schools and parents within the new context. Therefore, the National Association of Social Workers in Education is recommending that an integration between education welfare, behaviour support and other support agencies within LAs is considered, alongside the provision of mutual training programmes (NASWE, 2004).

For all these reasons, it is becoming essential that teachers in schools, especially those engaged in front-line pastoral care in secondaries and all primary-based staff, are given appropriate CPD on the requirements of the Children Act and its resultant practical implications. Ideally, local education welfare staff should be included as part of this training.

The findings from the survey also suggest that schools need to agree common referral policies and practices with local education welfare teams irrespective of whether these are school or authority based. Similarly, both school and LA policy documents on attendance need to be synergistic in order to meet recent legislative requirements. These policy documents should also take account of the requirements of the Children Act, which means that many will need to be updated. Future Ofsted inspections will also take the regulations introduced by the Children Act into account when reaching their recommendations and making their reports.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that whilst the Government is endeavouring to improve attendance rates and reduce truancy through a wide variety of national and local schemes (NAO, 2005), the evidence shows that the service whose prime responsibility it is to fulfil this role is being stretched to the limits. Moreover, the service does not believe existing court sanctions are working effectively (Zhang, 2004). It is feeling professionally demeaned and often demoralised. Surely this situation cannot be allowed to linger for very much longer.

If a fundamental review of the education welfare service were to be undertaken, it would surely recommend minimum entry standards, appropriate initial and professional development training and the consistent application of the service throughout every LA. The concern is that until this point is reached, there will continue to be some pupils and their parents who will consider that they can miss school with impunity. There will also be some headteachers who believe that their schools are not receiving the best possible service from their education welfare staff.

References


About the author

Professor Ken Reid is Deputy Principal at Swansea Institute of Higher Education. His latest book is Truancy: short and long-term solutions, published in 2002 by RoutledgeFalmer, date. At the time of writing, he and the NFER (2006) are undertaking a study of the effectiveness of the education welfare service in Wales. Preliminary findings suggest that the education welfare service in Wales is being handicapped by problems similar to those reported in this article.

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Weblinks

www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/atoz/e/educationwelfareservice

Teachernet gives a useful description of the education welfare service together with its responsibilities.

Local council websites also feature information about their own education welfare services.

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