

Children and Young People Committee

CYP(4)-08-11 Paper 3

Inquiry into the Implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009

Evidence from the Association for all School Leaders (NAHT) Cymru

About NAHT

NAHT Cymru has 1300 members. Membership is made up of head teachers, deputies and assistant heads in primary, secondary and special schools in Wales.

Across Wales, England and Northern Ireland, NAHT represents more than 28,000 school leaders, including virtually every special school head, 85% of all primary school heads, and over 40% of all secondary school heads in Wales, England and Northern Ireland.

It is the largest organisation of its kind in Europe

NAHT Cymru response to: The Children and Young People Committee inquiry into the implementation of the Learning and Skills Measure 2009.

Breadth of offer – it is undoubtedly the case that students now have access to a wider range of courses. However, this comes at the expense of travel – both pupils' time commitment and the cost to authorities. There is some evidence that some students shape their choices to avoid extended travel if possible.

Travel implications – At KS4, the scope for travel is limited. Larger schools are often able to meet the demands of the measure without engaging in partnership arrangements, so the pupils in these schools suffer less disruption to their learning programmes. Where there are extensive collaborative arrangements, these can have a distorting effect on the remainder of the curriculum and on the curriculum timings for those who are not involved in the collaboration.

For example, in order to provide for vocational courses, many schools have set up day release systems. This compacts the remainder of the curriculum into fewer teaching days. It also means that pupils who are not taking the vocational subject will study option subjects which are set against the vocational subject for the whole day – it is not uncommon to see KS4 timetable days that run “History, Chemistry, History, Chemistry, History” one week and “Chemistry, History, Chemistry, History, Chemistry” the next. This is not entirely helpful.

In KS5, however, many staff and students welcome the longer teaching blocks that come as a consequence of the need to travel. When dealing with advanced work, extended sessions can allow deeper treatment and better progress.

A further consequence of this type of provision is that if a child or a member of staff is absent, or there is a school closure day for training, a significant proportion of the teaching in that subject is lost.

In KS5, there is also greater breadth of offer and the fact that students have more time flexibility is helpful in making the system work. However, in rural areas where travel times are greater, there is more of a tendency for students to shape their options around the offer in their home institutions.

Staying in education – We have no evidence that the broader curriculum offer has encouraged more students to return to education post-16. In many ways, nothing has significantly altered for students, who already had the option of transferring to a college or training provider to take on a vocational course at post-16. Few students mix and match vocational and academic courses, and where they do, it is normally a vocational course with a very academic flavour – like business studies.

Where students have taken vocational courses at level 2 in KS4, there is rarely the chance to progress straight to level 3 at a college or training provider.

There is strong anecdotal evidence that KS4 learners are motivated by the vocational subjects on offer, and remain more fully engaged with education as a result. Attitudes to school are better, as is behaviour. This has knock-on consequences for other more academic subjects, and the existence of a

vocational curriculum is probably responsible for improving outcomes in subjects like English and Maths, because students feel part of the school and are experiencing success in the school environment.

Impact on other subjects – there has undoubtedly been an impact on the more traditional teaching subjects. After all, in an options system, there are only so many learners to share around. By having a dramatic expansion in the number of subjects on offer, it guarantees that there will be a shift of student population so that some subjects are no longer viable at reasonable cost. Different subjects will be affected in different schools, depending on popularity and local culture. Languages and second language Welsh may be particularly vulnerable, but equally it might be humanities, or separate sciences: there should be data collected on this issue in a systematic manner.

Small schools suffer particularly in this respect. If you only have 60 learners in a yeargroup (i.e. a school of around 400 if it also has sixth form provision), then to offer thirty subjects across four option choices suggests an average group size of eight. Clearly, that would not be sustainable and so the only way to proceed is to axe courses which do not recruit in sufficient numbers. Therefore there is the illusion of increased choice but the reality of restricted options. As the Learning and Skills measure is fully implemented, the regulation about not re-offering a subject that has failed to recruit for two years will have interesting consequences for these schools, who presumably will be forbidden from offering, say, French or Geography. This seems to be very much an unintended consequence!

Benefits – collaborative working between institutions has worked well in some federations post-16, where federations have been able to rationalise expensive provision by concentrating it in one institution rather than duplicating across several. It has also allowed federations to offer only provision of high quality by putting the curriculum offer into institutions where there are known strengths in delivery.

Transport costs – This concentration of resource can be very cost-effective in urban settings, but the argument is weaker in rural areas where the cost of transporting pupils can exceed the cost of employing a member of staff to deliver the course. To date, many of the transport costs have been met from

14–19 network funding. When the costs fall on colleges and schools, there will need to be a recalculation of the viability of moving the student population, and it may be that existing partnerships are unable to function. At this point, the future of the Measure becomes cloudy. This is a time of shrinking budgets, so maintaining costly provision will be difficult for all partners.

Welsh medium provision has improved in range, with some Welsh medium vocational courses established. However, there are still limited opportunities here, with colleges not always able or willing to set up KS4 vocational provision entirely through the Welsh language. Geographical boundaries of 14–19 networks do not necessarily coincide with the distribution of Welsh medium providers, which can lead to blurring of roles.