

OFFICIAL RESPONSE to the Welsh Government Consultation

Number: WG46923

Belonging, engaging and participating

Guidance on improving learner engagement and attendance.

July 2023

About Community Union

Formerly PAT/PANN and latterly Voice, the **Education and Early Years** section of **Community Union** is an independent trade union representing thousands of serving teachers and support staff, headteachers, lecturers, nursery and early years workers, nannies and other education professionals in schools and academies, nurseries and early years settings, colleges and universities across the whole of the UK.

We provide legal and casework support to our members and regularly engage with them in determining our response to policy proposals.

Community Union is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), to the Irish TUC, Scottish TUC and Welsh TUC as well as the General Federation of Trades Union (GFTU).

This Official Response has been prepared on behalf of members of the Education and Early Years section of Community Union by:

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As such this is a public document which will be published on our website following the consultation close.

The information shared within this response may be used and quoted as appropriate for the purposes it was gathered, and **Community Union** should be acknowledged as a contributor. We would be happy to discuss the comments in this response with the DfE or a research body acting on its behalf using the contact details supplied.

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Belonging, engaging and participating

Consultation response form

Responses should be returned by 20 July 2023 to:

Supporting Achievement and Safeguarding
Equity in Education Division
The Education Directorate
Welsh Government
Cathays Park
Cardiff
CF10 3NQ

or completed electronically and sent to:

email: ccd.sas@gov.wales

Question 1 – Does the draft ‘Belonging, engaging and participating’ guidance provide suitable useful, practical information for leaders, teachers and other practitioners in schools, pupil referral units and education otherwise than at school settings to enable schools and governing bodies to improve learner engagement and attendance?

Yes	✓	No		Not sure	
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Supporting comments

The draft ‘Belonging, engaging and participating’ guidance provides a comprehensive set of information for practitioners working across a wide variety of settings.

With any document of this scope there is always a risk that the document becomes so comprehensive that it is no longer accessible. This could mean that those who are supposed to be supported and protected through the provisions contained are actually hindered by the need to wade through pages of text and by adherence to unnecessary bureaucracy. We are therefore pleased that the document is well set out to facilitate the user locating the guidance they need without needing to search too long and though the document is comprehensive it is not unnecessarily burdensome bringing together existing guidance and new practices in the same place.

We are particularly pleased to see a commitment to review and evaluation to ensure that practices are effective and resulting in outcomes which benefit the school, staff, parents and pupils.

We are also pleased to see clear guidance on supporting those from non-residential backgrounds such as traveller, gypsy and Roma communities.

Question 2 – Does the draft ‘Belonging, engaging and participating’ guidance clearly set out the legal responsibility of the school and governors?

Yes	✓	No		Not sure	
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Supporting comments

In order to have the greatest impact there has to be focus on early intervention as data shows that reacting to situations once they have established is both less effective and more costly. We know that attendance is often a symptom of an underlying issue and that successful approaches are rooted in multi-agency working with a clear sense of accountability to ensure that expectations are met by all contributing parties. It is also crucial that any intervention is properly resourced with dedicated staffing and the funds to support them.

Governors need to be that critical friend to schools and school leaders but must also recognise that as a part of the parent body they can engage directly with parents to encourage a groundswell of support for improving attendance throughout the local community. If everyone works together, the role of the school in achieving the desired improvements are made easier.

Question 3 – Does the draft ‘Belonging, engaging and participating’ guidance clearly set out the responsibilities of the local authority?

Yes	✓	No		Not sure	
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Supporting comments

The role of the local authority is established by law (section 436A of the Education Act 1996), but this can be a very blunt instrument. Therefore, we are pleased to see additional guidance for local authorities and parents which show the importance of school provision, absence and attendance data, home-schooling registration.

There is undoubtedly a need for there to be better communication between the local authority, and parents, schools and special provision – especially around the reasons for absence, so that reasonable adjustments can be made before the imposition of fines.

We are particularly interested in the support that the local authority can provide to schools in interpreting the data surrounding attendance – recognising patterns, minimising exclusions, pastoral intervention.

It is important that local authorities recognise and support schools with the strategies to improve attendance and minimise disruption, such as engaging with parent forums and supporting pupil voice and recognising that improvements will take time to establish.

Since local authorities have the statutory duty to support and enforce attendance it is important that they play their role effectively, working with the schools and the local community and not in opposition to the direction of the school. These proposals should not expect school staff to go beyond their remit and risk damaging the relationships which they have with families though any necessary enforcement action or sanction.

Question 4 – Are the contributing factors and the many possible reasons for absence adequately covered?

Yes	✓	No		Not sure	
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Supporting comments

The lists contained within the proposals are extensive and cover the key contributing factors and many other reasons for absence. We are particularly pleased to see inclusion of mental health and wellbeing in the list as this has become a key concern for many schools, especially following the enforced closure of schools as a result of COVID.

What we would not wish, is for this, albeit extensive list, to be considered definitive. In the near future there may be legitimate reasons for absence which emerge, and which will need to be included. For this reason, we are pleased to note that the text clearly states that these lists include “but are not limited to” which will allow for some local interpretations may be necessary.

Question 5 – Are learners with protected characteristics included?

Yes	✓	No		Not sure	
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Supporting comments

We are pleased to see that effort has been made to recognise the factors such as poverty and additional learning needs as well as protected characteristics which can be associated with learners having a greater risk of absence from school and can exacerbate the challenges they already face. We would particularly be keen to understand the strategies and support that may be put in place in local areas to support families from Gypsy, Roma and traveller communities as well as those with experience in behavioural needs. And for skills and knowledge to be shared more widely as examples of good practice

Question 6 – Does the draft ‘Belonging, engaging and participating’ guidance provide sufficient information for parents and carers to understand their statutory responsibility for ensuring that their compulsory school-age children receive full-time education?

Yes		No		Not sure	✓
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Supporting comments

As stated in the proposals *“A key strategy for helping learners feel they belong to the school community is to ensure that their parents and carers feel respected and engaged”*. And it is vital that schools, their local community and parent bodies work together to ensure that statutory responsibilities are met, but also that the school is place, which is attractive to learners, a safe space for them to come to and one where they are valued.

It is important that schools break down the barriers and attitudes to schooling that may exist around school attendance, but it is necessary for the wider support services to support schools with this task as it cannot be an additional duty which is the sole responsibility of hard-working and dedicated teachers and leaders whose primary function is to provide education for those in the school.

We have some concerns that whilst providing *“opportunities for parent voice and to help remove barriers to attendance, including recognising the possibility of parental difficulties, stresses or trauma”* is important, it must be recognised that it is a school’s decision about which actions and interventions they are able to implement and take further. No parent or other stakeholder group may be allowed to have undue influence nor monopoly on curriculum, classroom delivery or assessment as these are matters which are to be determined by school leadership in line with national guidance and expectations.

Therefore, it will be important that any parental involvement is carefully managed.

Question 7 – Is the draft ‘Belonging, engaging and participating’ guidance explained clearly? If not, which areas could be improved and why? Are there aspects that you particularly like, and if so, why?

Yes	✓	No		Not sure	
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Supporting comments

Please see comments in response to other questions.

Question 8 – Is the draft ‘Belonging, engaging and participating’ guidance user-friendly? If not, which areas could be improved and why? Are there aspects that you particularly like and if so, why?

Yes		No		Not sure	✓
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Supporting comments

As previously mentioned, with any document of this scope there is always a risk that the document becomes so comprehensive that it affects its usability. If the document becomes impenetrable then those who are supposed to be supported and protected through the provisions contained are actually hindered by the need to wade through pages of text.

The draft ‘Belonging, engaging and participating’ document seems to be well set out to facilitate the user locating the guidance they need without needing to search too long and though the document is comprehensive it is not unnecessarily burdensome bringing together existing guidance and new practices in the same place.

We believe that a document such as this would work well as an interactive web service which may help parents and other individuals more easily use the guidance.

Question 9 – On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being ‘not at all’ and 5 being ‘very’) how helpful do you find the draft ‘Belonging, engaging and participating’ guidance? Are there improvements you would like to see?

1		2		3		4	✓	5	
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Supporting comments

It is difficult to envisage how the wide range of different audience types will engage with the document. For those working within the sector the document follows the prevailing logic in its terminology and layout although, as anticipated, there is necessarily some jargon which should be kept to a minimum wherever possible.

The contents page is very helpful for locating the necessary information and as mentioned previously we believe this would work well as an interactive web service which may help parents and other individuals more easily use the guidance and increase usage.

Question 10 – Does the draft ‘Belonging, engaging and participating’ guidance provide adequate information in relation to:

- i. explaining the principles and approaches that should be adopted in improving learner engagement and attendance?

Yes	✓	No		Not sure	
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Supporting comments

Community agree that a key element of good attendance is strong relationships between all parties – parents, pupils, schools, statutory agencies, support service and local authorities. It is vital that each part plays its role otherwise the burden is unfairly passed to others to be taken up. This burden ultimately ends up with the school.

We are supportive of a learner-centred approach, based on the rights of the child, but acknowledge that this must also hold in balance the curriculum, schools and staffing and the rights of employees. Although of vital importance, the rights of the child are just one voice in this conversation. We are therefore, pleased to note that this proposal seeks to have a much greater understanding of the issues which affect school attendance, appreciating that they cannot be resolved in isolation.

- ii. identifying the contributing factors that may impact on attendance?

Yes	✓	No		Not sure	
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Supporting comments

We have already noted that the greatest positive impact on improving attendance will be found through early intervention as data shows that reacting to situations once they have established is both less effective and more costly.

It is important that local authorities recognise and support schools with strategies to improve attendance once the underlying issues have been identified. We know that successful approaches are rooted in multi-agency working with a clear sense of accountability to ensure that expectations are met by all contributing parties.

It is crucial that any intervention is properly resourced with dedicated staffing and the funds to support them. We would not expect these proposals to place additional workload burdens upon school staff to go beyond their remit and risk damaging the relationships which they have with families through any necessary enforcement action or sanction.

iii. signposting to further guidance and good practice?

Yes	✓	No		Not sure	
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Supporting comments

It is important that schools break down the barriers and attitudes to schooling that may exist around school attendance. The signposting to the wider services that may be available are welcome, but they need to be more widely known and available. Indeed, there may be some areas of the country where there is a lack of resource, or where demand outstrips provision. There will need to be careful monitoring of provision and adequate funding to ensure that the wider support services can support schools with this task as it cannot be an additional duty placed solely upon schools.

iv. recording and analysis of attendance data?

Yes	✓	No		Not sure	
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Supporting comments

Schools are already required to hold accurate and up-to-date data on their pupils. It would be inappropriate for them to become data centres for the wider family though and data protection regulations would prevent them from legitimately gathering and storing information without genuine need.

Where there are concerns about child wellbeing and welfare, it is vital that data systems are compatible to allow safe and seamless transfer of information since we know that where there is a failure of communication, it is the children who suffer.

v. family engagement and multi-agency support?

Yes		No		Not sure	✓
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Supporting comments

Since the COVID pandemic, there has been an unprecedented surge in demand for mental health services for children (81%) and young people and 20% of children wait longer than 12 weeks for even the initial appointment.

Therefore, we have grave concerns that there is sufficient capacity within the wider support services to provide the necessary multi-agency support these proposals, and those of the ALN system.

As we previously noted, it is important that schools break down the barriers and attitudes to schooling that may exist around school attendance, but it is crucial for the wider support services to support schools with this task. It must not be an additional duty of the school and another measure by which they are held solely accountable.

vi. formal absence management?

Yes	✓	No		Not sure	
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Supporting comments

Formal absence management is a process, which may ultimately result in confrontational action. For this reason, it is crucial that schools exhaust all informal processes – including PSP, ALN adjustments and referrals, reduced timetables – in partnership with the LA, so that all actions can be seen to work to support the child and their families.

Parenting contracts, fixed penalty notices and other formal actions should not be the decision of the school. As we have previously noted local authorities have the statutory duty to support and enforce attendance and it is important that they play their role effectively, working with the schools and the local community and not in opposition to the direction of the school.

Furthermore, these proposals should not expect school staff to go beyond their remit and risk damaging the relationships which they have with families with any necessary enforcement action or sanction always remaining the sole responsibility of the local authority and legal system.

Question 11 – For statistical purposes, persistent absence has been defined in Wales as being absent for over 20% of half-day school sessions. The Welsh Government proposes that the statistical definition of persistent absence be amended to over 10% of sessions, which is the definition currently in use in England. Do you agree or not with this proposal and why?

Yes	✓	No		Not sure	
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Supporting comments

One of the key proposals within the ‘Belonging, engaging and participating’ document is for recorded attendance data to be accurate and for there to be suitable adjustment when considering children with additional learning needs, in care or acting as young carers themselves, experiencing difficulty at home. In situations such as these, simply recording the child as ‘absent’ seriously devalues the data. This mislabelling of vital attendance information may lead to unintended consequences such as failure to provide appropriate support or lead to safeguarding concerns. Furthermore, the accurate recording of data can support schools, local authorities and wider support services with early intervention programmes.

However, this does not mean that children should attend school at all costs. The pandemic has clearly shown us that we are wise to be alert to our own bodies and to remain at home when unwell. It is counterproductive for children and their teachers to attend when they are ill, for instance, because attending school could be more harmful than if they had stayed at home.

The argument of prudence and consistency of approach is a significant one here. Bringing the statistical definition of persistent absence in line with the definition current used in England does allow for some useful comparisons with the wider UK, but in the short term, will make meaningful comparison with previous Welsh data less possible. And in actuality may make the absence rate appear to worse than at present.

Question 12 – We would like to know your views on the effects that the draft ‘Belonging, engaging and participating’ guidance would have on the Welsh language, specifically on opportunities for people to use Welsh and on treating the Welsh language no less favourably than English.

What effects do you think there would be? How could positive effects be increased, or negative effects be mitigated?

Supporting comments

The plans for Cymraeg 2050 are best supported in schools. Even amongst Welsh natives there are a significant number who have never been taught to speak or read Welsh. This is especially the case for children from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, those in the armed forces and other who may move frequently. The best way of promoting the language is through our schools.

Question 13 – Please also explain how you believe the draft ‘Belonging, engaging and participating’ guidance could be formulated or changed so as to have positive effects or increased positive effects on opportunities for people to use the Welsh language and on treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language, and no adverse effects on opportunities for people to use the Welsh language and on treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language.

Supporting comments

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Question 14 – We have asked a number of specific questions. If you have any related issues which we have not specifically addressed, please use this space to report them:

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Responses to consultations are likely to be made public, on the internet or in a report. If you would prefer your response to remain anonymous, please tick here:

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