

Aontacht

Maximising student attendance, participation and retention



This edition of *Aontacht*, the staff newsletter of the National Educational Welfare Board outlines the extensive work carried out by the NEWB to gather evidence to support the implementation of a single strategic approach by its three service strands to issues of school attendance, participation and retention.

The brief outlines:

- ◆ The background and approach to gathering evidence to inform the integrated approach
- ◆ The evidence collected in three reports and main findings
- ◆ The translation of this evidence into the proposed ‘One Child, One Team, One Plan’ Practice Model
- ◆ Practice Model Development

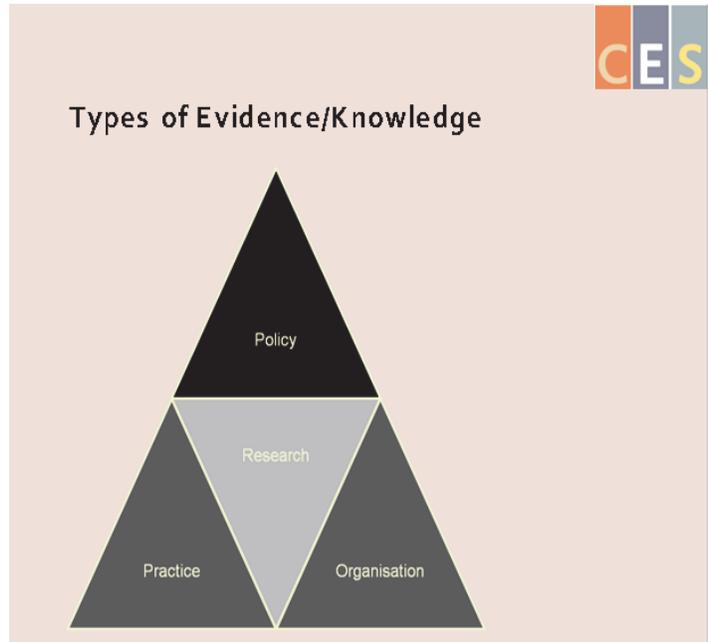
Background

In 2009 the remit of the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) was extended to include operational management responsibility for the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) and the School Completion Programme (SCP) - key elements of the DEIS strategy—in addition to the existing Educational Welfare Service (EWS). This presented the Board with a unique opportunity to develop an integrated approach across its three service strands which could respond to the complexity of issues that impact on school attendance, participation and retention and by so doing improve outcomes for children, young people and their families, in collaboration with schools and communities.

Approach to Task

A work programme was adopted in 2010 with the aim of gathering evidence to inform the design and implementation a single strategic approach to attendance, participation and retention. The task was guided by the work at the Centre of Effective Services (CES) in relation to evidence-informed service and programme design.

Building on this model, the National Educational Welfare Board developed a bespoke approach to the gathering of evidence to inform the design of an integrated service model of intervention.



The evidence-gathering task involved three distinct but related ‘lenses’ on current practice, best practice and practitioner perspective, drawing on:

- ◆ The experience and expertise of staff of the three service strands, school staff, parents, students and other stakeholders through a dedicated consultation process
- ◆ The evidence of Irish and international research telling us what works well in helping children to attend school participate in education, and stay in education to Leaving Cert level, or equivalent
- ◆ A systematic attempt to capture the complex and diverse practices engaged by the service strands and school staffs in supporting families, children and young people to engage with school life.

The next section presents an overview of the three reports commissioned by NEWB to gather evidence to inform the development of the integrated approach to attendance, participation and retention.



1. Consultation, and Stakeholder Engagement

In 2011 the NEWB undertook a consultation process. The purpose of this consultation was to ensure that the integration of the 3 service strands was informed by the views of those who deliver the services and the families and children who were supported by it. The work was undertaken by SMCIA, an independent research organisation and the consultation involved three parts:

- A staff questionnaire administered across the three service strands and schools
- Consultation workshops for staff in the three strands and schools
- Small group discussions for children, young people and their parents/guardians

The findings of the consultation captured excellent practice on the ground and very positive attitudes towards a single strategic approach.

SMCIA found strong support for the integrated service, citing the high level of engagement in the consultation and a focus on opportunities rather than challenges.

A shared child-centred vision was identified.

Stakeholders, it was found, expect the service to help children and young people to have a high quality educational experience, attain well and complete their education. Stakeholder focus was clearly on supporting the most marginalised and most in need of support. SMCIA found a strong base to build from with all three strands having shared positive views of the strengths of each individual strand.

The basis for a continuum approach was identified through the various focuses and strengths of the three service strands - EWS in the area of supporting attendance in a structured proactive way, HSCL in the preventative work engaging with parents and SCP in the area of targeted work with pupils most at risk of early school leaving.

Mutual respect and the desire to build on what the each of the services do well was evident in the consultation with stakeholders.

Stakeholders identified opportunities to craft a collaborative working structure across the strands and schools. They identified the need to have clearly defined roles and responsibilities, to enhance communication and joint planning and to build local networks in a team around the child.

Stakeholders welcomed a range of approaches to measuring progress and capturing learning.

For further reading go to www.newb.ie – publications to download the report on the consultation exercise

2. Mapping Practice

Part of the evidence-gathering process included a systematic attempt to capture the practice of the three strands - Educational Welfare Service, Home School Community Liaison Scheme and the School Completion Programme - in their day-to-day work in supporting children and young people with attendance, participation and retention difficulties, as well as capturing the practice experiences of schools staffs.

In effect, NEWB aimed to capture how the strands work either individually or collaboratively to support children and young people have difficulty engaging with school life and reaching their full potential. Capturing ‘practice wisdom’ is regarded as a key element of demonstrating and describing the evidence base to inform future practice development.

To achieve this, NEWB commissioned Anne McMurray of Anne McMurray Development Ltd to support NEWB in the development of an innovative way to capture the voices of practitioners in the complex task of supporting families, children and young people who are very often on the margins of the education system.

The approach taken to capture the practice was to use **Sensemaker™** technology – a software package which enabled the collection, storage and analysis of a large volume of qualitative narratives (stories). Respondents narrated their experience (story) then made sense of (signified) their own stories against predefined signifiers using a question (signification) framework. 332 people participated in the survey.

The approach taken allowed for a rich depository of data to be collected: both in terms of patterns emerging and rich narratives describing the challenging work engaged in by the service strands and by schools.

Key themes arising from the project have supported NEWB’s approach to developing an intervention practice model - *One Child, One Team, One Plan* - particularly in relation to integrated practice development, embedding new practice through Continuous Professional Development and organisational practices to support integrated working.

Key themes included:

There is need for highly developed **advocacy** practices that are appropriate to each of the service strands.

The importance of **listening to the child** when devising plans and interventions is a key element in **on-going support** for children who struggle in school and need to experience meaningful engagement in school life.

Clarity around professional **boundaries and accountability** is necessary to facilitate effective collaborative work among professionals and with children and families. Effective **communication strategies** are essential in planning and coordination of interventions.



Partnership with parents is a critical factor in the support of the child's engagement in school life. The need for intensive and on-going supports for children who are affected by bereavement, family breakdown, mental health, imprisonment, absent parents, and low levels of literacy. There is a need for schools to be aware of and sensitive to family circumstances that impact on the child.

There is frequent evidence that NEWB personnel are involved with **complex family situations**. The successful outcomes for the child and the family are usually contingent on persistence with continued and long term supports.

The experiences submitted in the research indicated that there is highly evolved **collaborative practice** among NEWB personnel when dealing with challenging family situations. This highlights the need to support lone workers in non-DEIS schools.

The **complexity of the challenges** that beset families and children was a recurring theme throughout the experiences. NEWB personnel work in a highly skilled way with families in relation to parenting, loss and grief, mediation, negotiation, cross cultural collaboration, conflict mediation, creative problem solving, influencing, networking and inter-agency engagement.

The NEWB has a role in assisting the family to **partner with the school** in the education and development of their child. The NEWB also has a role to work with schools in creating a positive school climate that fosters inclusivity and respects diversity. NEWB personnel are well positioned to work with schools to implement innovative approaches to learning that better meet the needs of the child who struggles with attendance, participation and retention.

Consideration needs to be given to **tailored individualised responses** where appropriate, having regard for optimal use of resources.

The chances of securing better outcomes for children are increased when there is a systematic approach to **early identification of needs** coupled with targeted early intervention that is underpinned by evidenced informed strategies that support attendance, transfer, participation and retention.

For further reading go to www.newb.ie – publications to download the report 'Mapping Practice—Mission in Possible'

3. Examining Research

Another important strand of the work programme centred on gathering research evidence about what works for children and young people. A review of national and international research entitled *Addressing the participation, attendance and retention of children in education: A review of best practice* was undertaken by SQW on behalf of the NEWB.

The aims of the study were to:

- Review and synthesise the best available international evidence and literature relating to intervention and processes to address the attendance, participation and retention of children in education
- Provide an understanding of the policy and legislative frameworks from which the interventions and processes derived

SQW selected 39 documents out of a list of 850 that provided enough evidence to contribute to at least one aspect of the review. The studies identified included a number of previous literature reviews, including impact evaluations.

In setting out the parameters of the study the NEWB was particularly interested in finding out more about (i) effective, (ii) promising and (iii) ineffective interventions and processes in relation to the participation, attendance and retention of children in formal education.

Interestingly the research noted the lack of effectiveness of court / parental sanctions as stand-alone action in isolation of welfare interventions. This validates the welfare approach which views legal proceedings as an action of last resort, utilised only when parents refuse to co-operate with the Board in addressing the barriers to school attendance. Even when legal proceedings conclude, the NEWB continues to work with the family to ensure that there is a return to education for the child concerned.

The main findings of the literature review echoed many of the messages that came through the consultation and mapping practice studies. Significantly, the need to obtain reliable evidence, utilise needs-based interventions and a whole school approach were highlighted by the literature review. Other key messages included:

- ◆ Early and swift identification of risk or need
- ◆ Appropriate targeting of interventions (and the implications that this had for diagnosis of need and the sharing of information and data across a range of agencies)



- ◆ A need for a combination of strategies to ensure that the child (and, where necessary, the family) is at the centre of the interventions
- ◆ Ongoing support for those who are targeted – whether in-school or out of school
- ◆ Ensuring that provision is made to enable young people to stay on track
- ◆ NEWB can best address issues related to poor attendance, poor participation or poor retention through work with a range of other agencies focused on the child and family

For further reading go to www.newb.ie – publications to download the report on review of best practice

Impact on Practice Model Development

The findings of the three reports outlined have been used by the NEWB to inform the development of a proposed intervention practice model *One Child, One Team, One Plan*.

Key among these findings are:

- ◆ The importance of identifying needs of the individual child in any approach to attendance, retention or participation and the need to plan and put in place the appropriate strategies and combination of strategies that will address the needs that have been identified

An ‘**Understand-Plan-Do-Review**’ cycle is now a fundamental part of the proposed practice model.

- ◆ The importance of intervening early, offering personalised support and engagement with families and their children, both at transition points and when children are at risk of disengaging from education

A ‘**continuum of support**’ which considers the needs of the child has been incorporated into the proposed practice model.

- ◆ The need to develop supportive and positive school environments

A ‘**whole school approach**’ has also been factored into the draft Practice model).

- ◆ The importance of community interventions that maintain connectedness with the school, the student, the family and the community addressing both personal and practical issues

The **individual child, the school, the family and the wider community** are all elements of a framework in understanding the needs of the child.

- ◆ The efficacy of an intensive case management approach, working with families and children to address emerging problems of poor attendance or behaviour

The concept of a ‘**team around the child**’ is a key to proportionate intervention and support in the proposed model.

In addition, the model values the importance of

- ◆ An outcomes framework as a measure of the impact of interventions and progress made
- ◆ Recording proportionate to intervention
- ◆ The concept of a ‘lead intervention’ reflecting the needs of the child at any particular point in their journey to deal with issues of attendance, participation or retention.

In conclusion....

The work of NEWB and its service strands focuses on school attendance, participation and retention. It provides a national service to all schools and families through its Educational Welfare Service (EWS). In schools participating in the DEIS initiative, it has an added responsibility for operational management of two school-based support services - the Home School Community Liaison initiative and the School Completion Programme.

The way these three service strands intervene with students and families, in collaboration with the school, is central to the **One Child, One Team, One Plan** model. In DEIS schools, where 2 or more of the strands may be working with a child and/or family, the model is designed to ensure that the approach of those involved is systematic, consistent and professional and has the strongest likelihood of improving outcomes for the pupils concerned. In non-DEIS schools, the objective is to have the same quality of approach to collaboration between the EWS and school structures concerned with attendance, participation and retention.

NEWB wishes to thank most sincerely all those who, in one way or another, contributed to the work that culminated in the three reports presented above. The unselfish sharing of rich experience by children, families, schools, communities and by our own services was invaluable to the task. Míle buíochas do chách.

