



To:
Councillor Robert Smith
Cabinet Member for Education and Skills

BY EMAIL

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Summary: This is a letter from the Education Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Education and Learning following the meeting of the Panel on 17 October 2024. The Panel met with the Headteacher and Chair of Governors from Gwyrosydd Primary School to discuss their school development plan.

Dear Cllr Smith,

Education Scrutiny Performance Panel – 17 October 2024

We thanked the Acting Headteacher and the Chair of Governors from Gwyrosydd Primary School for their presentation addressing the set of questions that were sent to the school in advance of the meeting. We are writing to you as the Cabinet Member to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion and to share the views of the Panel.

We welcome the progress that has been made with the School Improvement Plan since the Estyn Inspection in February 2023. We were particularly keen to hear about the progress being made in relation to the three Estyn recommendations contained in that report.

It was evident that the school is clearly now on a path to improvement. The school, the governing body and local authority are working to help address the three Estyn recommendations. We heard from the Acting Headteacher that these recommendations closely interlink with the School Improvement Plan and are helping to move improvements forward.

The Panel recognised that there has been quite a period of instability at the school which included higher than desired levels of staff sickness, including the intermittent attendance by the previous Headteacher at the school. There had been no office staff and no caretaker for a period of time. There has also been a high turnover of school governors.

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The Panel were pleased to hear that this has been partially addressed with an acting Headteacher appointed, a new Chair of Governors and that there has been strong support from the School Improvement Adviser. Although it was recognised that the permanent Headteacher position needed to be resolved. We heard that this appointment will be made in readiness for the 2025 school year. Staff sickness levels at the school are still high but improvements have been made including the appointment of back office staff.

The Panel were concerned about the high turnover in the Governing Body and in particular, in relation to the Local Authority Governor representative position, which has had a number of changes over recent years and has now remained unfilled for some time. The Panel asked if you could follow this up and see if that can be resolved as a matter of urgency.

The Acting Headteacher and Chair of Governors are clearly committed to making the improvements required at the school and have put a number of improvements in place to begin that process. The Panel were pleased to hear from the School Improvement Adviser that 'he is pushing at an open door' with them. Some of these improvements include:

- A revised School Improvement Plan has been developed, identifying progress made, what is needed and the milestones for that improvement. This has been developed in conjunction with staff and Governors at the school.
- Pupil voice has been strengthened substantially at the school, with pupils having a strong input into their learning. The Panel were particularly pleased to hear from a group of pupils about how they thought this was going.
- The school has worked hard to develop the Curriculum for Wales, including using new initiatives to ensure the progressive development of pupil skills. The Panel were particularly keen to hear about the use of local knowledge and history as a basis for some of the projects being undertaken at the school.

We asked about the challenges faced by the school and how they are working to address or mitigate them. The Panel heard about:

- Staff sickness and the instability of the Headteacher position over recent years. This made it difficult for the school to focus on its core purpose and has affected staff morale. Listening to staff concerns, support and encouraging staff development has and will continue to help to improve this, but this is still a challenge.
- Staff stress. Concern with issues including the numbers of pupils with Additional Learning Needs and the associated pressures that come with that. Also the time required for non-teaching tasks like nappy changing and form filling.
- Budget related matters was raised including, for example, cost of sickness cover.
- Premises. A limited amount of money has been put into the maintenance and improvement to the school and its grounds over recent years. This includes the pupil toilets needing attention and CCTV system needing investment.
- Lack of signage to and at the school was highlighted as a concern. This makes it difficult to locate, which some Councillors attending the session experienced firsthand!
- Not having a Flying Start at the school and the numbers of pupils in reception and year 1 declining, mainly because pupils who attend Flying Start settings tend to stay in the school in which that is located.

The Chair of Governors highlighted some of the challenges the Governing Body have or are experiencing, including:

- Uncertainty around Governing Body stability. A new Chair of Governors has now been appointed but the constant turnover of Governors continues to be a challenge, with the governing body struggling to appoint the numbers of Governors they require. This therefore results in the governing body being constantly in new/development of new governor mode, making it difficult to carry out the key roles to the school of support and challenge.
- Managing sickness absence and dealing with Human Resource procedures at the school.
- High turnover of office staff and retaining people has proved difficult.
- Budget has taken a hit due to loss of Headteacher.

The school also outlined how well they feel they had been supported throughout this process to date, including saying:

- They have received excellent support from the School Improvement Adviser, particularly with the increased level of support required to assist the acting Headteacher.
- Human Resources support for the school has been valuable.

The Panel wished to emphasise the importance of ensuring continued support and assistance for the Acting Headteacher, as this has clearly been, and still is, a challenging role.

The Panel wished to praise the progress made at the school so far and look forward to those improvement bedding in. The developments in relation to pupil voice at the school should be applauded. We look forward to seeing continued improvement in the stability at the school, particularly with the appointment of a permanent Headteacher, the continued reduction in staff sickness levels and a full and functioning Governing Body.

Your Response

We would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter but on this occasion do not require a formal written response.

Yours sincerely

COUNCILLOR LYNDON JONES

Convener, Education Scrutiny Performance Panel

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