



**To/
Councillor Jen Raynor
Cabinet Member for Education
Improvement, Learning and Skills**

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BY EMAIL

Summary: This is a letter from the Education Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Education Improvement, Learning and Skills following the meeting of the Panel on 11 July 2019. It is about improving wellbeing in Schools after a visit to Dylan Thomas Community School.

Dear Councillor Raynor,

Education Scrutiny Performance Panel – 11 July 2019

At our meeting on the 11 July 2019, we visited and met with the Chair of Governors, Executive Head, Headteacher and the Senior Deputy Headteacher at Dylan Thomas Community Comprehensive School.

We chose to speak to this school because we had heard about the positive practice at the school in relation to improving the wellbeing of pupils, with the aim of and resulting in, improving pupil attainment. We understand that Wellbeing is a key aspect of the New Curriculum and thought that it would be timely to get a good understanding of the key issues by seeing work being done on the ground with pupils. We have detailed our thoughts on our visit in this letter.

We heard about the context of the school and why wellbeing is so key for Dylan Thomas. It is a Comprehensive School that has in excess of 529 pupils, including three Specialist Teaching Facilities (STF) on site. 70% of the pupils live in the 20% most deprived areas of Wales so there is a high level of poverty here. 54% of the pupils receive Free School Meals. Over 60% of pupils have a reading age significantly below their chronological age on entry to Year 7. 60% of pupils are identified as having Additional Learning Needs. There is also increasing Mental Health complaints and high mobility rate and in year transfers.

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We heard that the focus of the school, and of staff, is on raising the expectations of pupils and improving their aspirations; that there are many talented children at the school, but, unfortunately, some children do not see themselves as good enough and underestimate their abilities. The Headteacher explained that the barriers and challenges the school face could not be used as an excuse for poor standards, telling us about some examples of children who have excelled at the school. We agreed that high aspirations for all pupils is key.

In terms of outcomes and the performance data, the school has been on a journey of improvement since 2010/11. In 2015 41% of pupils achieved L2+ up from 15% in 2011. However, since then the goalposts have shifted significantly with all performance data including non-mainstream pupils, outcomes therefore look lower.

We also heard that there have been changes to exam qualifications discounting of vocational subjects. We understand that vocational subjects are the ones that suit many of the pupils at Dylan Thomas best so these changes are negative on pupils at the school. We recognise that for Dylan Thomas it is not about less achievement but that some achievements are no longer accredited.

There are three STFs at the school and all are counted in the performance data. For the school there are different levels of success. For some that might mean getting a G, for others it may be about getting As. We agreed with them when they said that pupils are all impressive in their own way.

There has been a big improvement in attendance levels. Going up from 88% to 93%, which is the schools best ever attendance figure. We heard that pupils enjoy coming to school, that they feel supported as well as challenged. Many also have a free breakfast here to ensure a good start to the day.

We were very impressed with the young people who took us on a tour of the school. We felt that they are great ambassadors for the school.

We would like to share the key learning points we found from our visit with you.

To improve wellbeing across schools in Swansea we need to ensure:

- Wellbeing is at the heart of what they do
- They constantly remind pupils of expectations and raise their aspirations
- They constantly build and improve relationships at the school, with parents and the local community
- They focus on positivity rather than punitive sanctions: a positive approach to pupil attainment and behaviour (examples including capture and promote positives, praise, reward, meet and greet at school gates, learning walks rather than behaviour room)
- Schools are proud of their pupils and they develop a sense of community
- They recognise that one size does not fit all, individualise when and where possible
- They work closely with other agencies like Evolve, Youth Offending Service, Education Other Than At School services, Princes Trust etc.

- They continually work to improve pupil attendance
- They train staff in how to improve behaviour and avoid exclusions including Pivotal Behaviour Approaches.
- They have a strong challenging but supportive governing body
- They are sharing and seeking best practice in order to continually improve.

We heard from the Chair of Governors that finance is a great source of worry to the governing body, that it is still the great unknown so a lot of uncertainty. Also that the Senior Leadership Team was restructured because of the budget and that they were only able to do that successfully because of the quality of staff they have. He expressed his concerns about future finances and how uncertainty makes it difficult for the school to forward plan. He felt that it was a great strain on teachers and a real barrier to moving forward. We agreed that being able to forward plan with some certainty financially in the medium term rather than just the short term is very important and we said we would raise this with you.

We were pleased to hear that there are strong links between the school and the Council's Pupil and Governor Unit who they felt are supportive. We were also encouraged to hear that the school feel that the School Improvement Service now understands the school (and its context) and that they receive genuine support from them, which the school finds very helpful.

We would like to congratulate everyone at the school and the governing body for the hard work and commitment to their improvement journey. Particularly in relation to improving the wellbeing of pupils at the school, which is clearly proving to be successful in not only the wellbeing of pupils but in improving school attendance and the reduction in pupil exclusion. We would like to compliment the school for developing a culture where pupils feel valued. We wish the school the very best for the future.

We welcome your thoughts on any of the issues raised in our letter but would ask for your response in writing on the following point by 22 August 2019.

1. We agreed that being able to forward plan with some certainty financially in the medium term rather than just the short term is very important. Could you let us know your thoughts on this matter particularly how schools can plan for the medium term future when budgets are so uncertain moving forward?

Yours sincerely,

COUNCILLOR LYNDON JONES

Convener, Schools Scrutiny Performance Panel

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