

Botanic Primary School**Ref No: 101-6499**

A strategy combining extrinsic awards, information to parents and prompt action when attendance drops to 90%.

Context:

Botanic Primary School and Nursery Unit is a controlled school in South Belfast with 222 children with an extremely diverse range of backgrounds; 28 languages are spoken in the school. In 2009 Botanic Primary School had the second lowest attendance figure in Belfast with an average attendance of 84.5%. Seventeen percent of the school population are Roma and just over 60% are entitled to free school meals. The number of children who have newcomer status is almost half the school, which has a significant impact on the attendance figures.

Intervention:

The principal and governors have worked proactively to improve the attendance of all of the children. The governors requested a breakdown of attendance figures both with and without the attendance figures for the Roma children. It was discovered that without the figures for Roma children that the overall attendance was 5% higher.

The principal visited a local post primary school with similar intake patterns to see their approach to improving attendance and, with the governors decided to tackle attendance in three ways.

1. Awards: the school introduced an attendance award with special trips for all children with 95% or better attendance in term 2 and term 3. They began recording attendance from scratch for both term 2 and 3 to ensure that the children could improve their attendance and have a chance to go on the second trip. When first introduced, there was a backlash from parents of a child who had just missed out being eligible for reasons of illness or bereavement. Although very sympathetic, the principal and governors held to the criteria of 95%; parents and children now accept that this is the threshold.

This approach has been very successful, with 70 children on the first trip rising to 100 children (half of the school) eligible for the second trip. A small number of Roma children also achieved 95% and have been included. The cost of this initiative is around £500 per trip, which the principal, staff and governors feel is a worthwhile and effective strategy.

There are also rewards for attendance at weekly assemblies to ensure that there are as many opportunities as possible to encourage attendance.

2. Information: the school informs parents of the breakdown of days missed rather than percentage figures to ensure that they are aware of how single days absent here and there can add up to weeks of learning missed. Attendance is discussed at every meeting with parents and is highlighted in the school newsletters.

Previously the school had responded to low attendance when the figure for a child fell to 85% and the Education Welfare Officer (EWO) became involved, however it was decided that there is a need to be more proactive. Now, when a child's attendance falls below 90% the school will begin to contact parents by letter or phone and highlight the concerns.

It is the role of all staff in the school to monitor attendance patterns and encourage good attendance, such as, ensuring that when a session is missed to attend a medical appointment then the child returns to school immediately. The staff model good attendance with teacher absence figures less than 1% last year. It is the recognised role of all staff to work to make school a place that children want to attend.

The school works very closely with the Education Welfare Service (EWS), however they find that children can be signed off by the EWS when their attendance rises above 85% for a couple of weeks. However, this is very often not sustained and the referral process needs to be started all over again, which can take up to three months.

Impact:

Attendance has risen over four years by just over 6% to an overall school average of 90.5%. However, it is a belief of the principal and governors that schools can find it difficult to change the habits of parents (many of whom may have had poor attendance themselves) and need to create a vibrant learning atmosphere so that pupils want to come to a safe and secure environment. When this works, the pupils insist that they are brought to school regularly.

The number of newcomer children who are absent during term time in order to visit their home country remains an issue. Parents must write to the board of governors to indicate their intention to take their children out of school for family visits. The principal and governors have great sympathy for parents who must do this during term time however these absences have to remain unauthorised. The traditional July and August holiday period does not suit all newcomer families; for example, it is the hurricane season in the Philippines and it is too hot, for example, for a child with a serious medical condition to visit family in China.

Attendance levels continue to improve and the approaches outlined are continuing. The most recent figure for attendance, without the Roma children included is 94%, an increase of 9.5% from 2009, when there were no Roma children enrolled in the school.

In the case of Roma pupils we were able to show how increased attendance had led to noticeable improvements using the CEFR.

We have also been able to prove that currently in P4-6, 97% of pupils using standardised tests have made the expected levels of improvement with about 35% of these making higher than expected levels of progress on an annual basis.