

Malone College**Ref No: 126-0294**

A case study of liaising effectively through an outreach worker with parents when attendance is poor: also a school with a very significant proportion of newcomer children and one of the lowest average attendance rates in Northern Ireland.

Context:

During 2013 Malone College had an overall attendance rate of 85.8% which was one of the lowest average percentage rates in all post-primary schools. The school recognised that in order to effectively improve performance outcomes and pupil experiences, there was an urgent need to address this issue.

Intervention:

The challenge, as a whole school priority, was to:

- Raise the profile of the importance of attendance among all the stakeholders.
- Review current practices and identify areas of improvement internally and externally.
- Set realistic targets and effectively use data to facilitate quicker responses to absenteeism.
- Engage with the community and establish better working relationships.
- To seek new and more effective ways to engage the hearts and minds of all stakeholders.
- Establish closer working relationship with the education welfare (EWO) services.

Led by member of the senior leadership team, the attendance officer and an outreach attendance worker, the response was to ensure openness, transparency, and accountability coupled with up-to-date performance information. The approach:

- increased the profile of attendance at whole school level through letters to parents, posters, assemblies, staff presentation and reward attendance incentives;
- trialled the appointment of an outreach worker for a year (15 hours per week); and if there was evidence of impact to increase the post to full-time (while initially on a part time basis the appointment is now full-time due to effective impact);
- presented a weekly visual attendance tracking system (via SIMS) with comparative data online which allows **ALL** staff to identify trends and compare data in relation to form classes, year groups and the whole school;
- uses a visual traffic lights system to raise student awareness;
- provides attendance reward events (a movie and popcorn) each term;
- meets weekly with the EWO and undertakes monthly audits to review data and identify trends and areas of improvement;

- engages in meetings with community groups and targeted groups - the principal met a group of representatives from the Roma community in their local community hall and the attendance officer makes regular home visits;
- establishes a whole school collective responsibility for attendance and a cohesive approach to tackling it (monthly attendance priorities at pastoral meetings); and
- specifically targets year 8 students so that expectation and routines become established for later years.

Outcome:

During 2014 attendance increased to 87.5% (1.7 percentage point increase).

During 2015 attendance increased to 89.5% (2 percentage point increase).

Attendance through the year 2015-16 school year was 91% (a 5.2 percentage point increase).

The impact of the full time outreach officer cannot be underestimated. It has allowed the school time to establish a first day response call or visit for targeted students. It has facilitated many home visits for parents and students experiencing barriers to learning. It has enabled reminder visits prior to the start of term and prior to school returns after holidays. It has enabled one to one interviews and follow-ups in and outside of school. The ability to make personal 'call outs' on the first day of absence has facilitated quicker resolutions to issues.

- Parents are welcoming to the outreach officer in the home.
- Parents who may not have answered or engaged in home or phone contact are more receptive due to the relationships established.
- First day response calls have reduced the length of absenteeism among our students.
- A year 8 early intervention strategy has resulted in a reduction of students displaying attendance below 85% as they progress to Year 9.