

**St Joseph's Primary School (Slate St), Belfast**

**Ref No: 103-6621**

*A strategy combining a Parent Support Officer, development of the learning environment, close liaison with parents and the Education Welfare Officer (EWO), including early intervention, home visits, and extrinsic rewards.*

**Context:**

There are 216 pupils on the roll, 24% are newcomer children and 71% are entitled to free school meals. The school is situated in the second most deprived ward in Northern Ireland. This ward also has the highest recorded incidents of reported anti-social behaviour.

The school's overall attendance has been:

- Sept 2012 - June 2013 – 92.2%
- Sept 2013 - June 2014 – 94.8%
- Sept 2014 - June 2015 – 94.6%

Challenges to the school's attendance include:

- Generational unemployment leading to a lack of value of education.
- A significant number of families known to/supported by Social Services.
- Poor attendance on Mondays and Fridays.

**Intervention:**

Strategies in place include:

- Appointment of a full-time parent support officer who plays a significant supportive role in attendance matters.
- A merit system specifically for attendance with each class displaying attendance leaders individually and on a class by class basis and rewards each month for classes.
- Targets set for specific classes with rewards for monthly *improved* attendance.
- Parents required to give reasons for absences.
- Good working relationships exist between the school and its parents and this is further facilitated by the EWO and, importantly, the valuable role played by the parent support officer.
- The EWO meets with the principal/vice principal and parent support officer on a six-weekly basis to discuss attendance and referrals.
- The parent support officer contacts parents of children who are absent by phone to talk to the parent about possible issues they may have and to help them resolve issues.

- The parent support officer and principal/vice principal visit homes if required when attendance becomes a concern, especially with those who have social, emotional and/or child protection needs.
- Developing relationships with parents through opening up the breakfast club to all of the family and having an occasional pop-up coffee table attended by staff and parents welcoming families to school.
- Creating an attractive and welcoming learning environment to make the school a place the children want to attend. The importance of having a stimulating outdoor environment is essential here too to entice children to school.
- Breakfast club for children and families (parents, older siblings, grandparents).
- Creating clubs on Friday afternoons for children to encourage sustained attendance.
- Importance of attendance is a feature of curriculum evenings and is part of the end-of-year report.
- The importance of promoting the 'Nurturing School' and 'Nurturing' principles.

### **Impact:**

The principal reports that attendance is a regular feature of staff meetings to ensure fresh approaches are introduced. The staff keep the strategies in place under review to ensure that pupils remain engaged, this year they have modified the reward system for attendance as it was felt that it was losing its impact as an incentive. Consequently additional rewards have been introduced including a visit to a local cinema.

The involvement of the parent support officer has proved very successful. Early intervention is becoming routine practice to address poor attendance, allowing the teachers to concentrate on teaching and learning and providing parents with a support network to help them address issues at home which have a negative impact upon attendance.

The school is continuing to develop its use of data to correlate the impact of attendance upon achievement as measured in relation to standardised test scores:

- 34.4% of children are presently on the SEN register, the figure was 45% in September 2013.
- Underachievement in literacy in June 2013 was 56.12%. By June 2015 it had dropped to 22.11%.
- Underachievement in mathematics in June 2013 was 54.35%. By June 2015 it had dropped to 41%.
- In 2014-15, 64 children received a 10 week Reading Partnership programme. 62 of the children increased their reading age by over 6 months.

The principal identifies the attention given to improving attendance is a contributory factor in these improvements. It is the opinion of the staff that if children do not attend school, they cannot learn effectively and consistently.

A group of children who attend the nurture unit have all improved attendance since starting.