



How St Helens Council is addressing attendance and tackling challenging behaviour



Reducing truancy and dealing with a wide range of difficult behavioural issues are top priorities for St Helens Council in their quest to improve learner outcomes. Could attitudinal surveys help reduce the risk of children becoming disengaged?

“As an area struggling with severe deprivation, unemployment and high levels of teenage pregnancy, we’re keenly aware of how important it is that we encourage children to value their education,” says Helen Ashton, cross phase behavioural specialist at St Helens Council. “Our aim is to work with local schools, supporting both them and their pupils to ensure this happens. To do this effectively, we need to understand any emotional obstacles the children might have. Attitudinal surveys help us gain an insight into what these might be.”

St Helens Council in Merseyside is a small local authority in an area with high socio-economic disadvantage and health levels that are lower than the national average for children and young people. In 2007, National Strategies classed the authority as a Persistent Absence (PA) local authority, meaning incidences of school absence exceeded 20%.

The council is well aware that pupils who regularly miss classes are less likely to make good progress in school and are at greater risk of negative outcomes, such as youth crime, teen pregnancy or drug and alcohol abuse. Addressing attitudes to attendance and improving outcomes for

young people are therefore main concerns for the borough.

Helen Ashton is a cross phase behavioural specialist who works with many schools across the area, including Haydock Sports College, a secondary school with a good track record in successfully supporting children with challenging behaviours. Helen says, “Talking to the school, the transition period into Year 7 was clearly flagged as an issue. Many teachers were concerned that children were joining the school with a range of behavioural problems and poor social skills. In order to intervene earlier to address these problems, we decided to start working with children before they reached Year 7.”

Motivations and mind-sets

Helen worked with a feeder primary school, using the *Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS)* attitudinal survey to gain an insight into the motivations and mind-sets of Year 5 and 6 children. The survey is comprised of short psychometric questions that are designed to look at nine factors linked to key educational goals. These include how well children are responding to the curriculum, how prepared they are to learn and their general work ethic.



A low score in any factor can accurately pinpoint negative attitudes that may not otherwise be apparent. In the case of attendance, a low score can highlight a potential problem before a child starts missing school, giving teachers a chance to intervene at an early stage and reduce the likelihood of truancy.

“It was very straightforward to profile the children as they enjoyed completing the survey. We immediately saw a pattern of low scores in some pupils’ self-regard, confidence in learning and attitudes to attendance, particularly for girls. This confirmed our fear that negative feelings were starting early.”

Haydock has been using *PASS* for a while, so Helen was able to cross-reference her findings with results from older children that had previously been surveyed. “Haydock’s analysis of pupils mirrored our own findings by indicating significantly lower scores for girls in relation to perceived learning capabilities and attendance – and this was clearly reflected in poor attendance rates higher up the school.”

Boosting self-esteem

The revealing results were the starting point for introducing some targeted activities to deal with areas where pupils had scored poorly. Helen continues, “It was clear that we needed to look at specific initiatives to improve attitudes to attendance and boost self-esteem, particularly for the girls. After liaising with key educational welfare staff, we opted for a half-day session and designed activities based around a conceptual tree idea, concentrating on aspirations, thinking skills you need as a learner and ‘why it’s good to be me.’”

“We selected some ‘girl-friendly’ activities, including co-operative tasks and choice of friendship groups, and although the girls responded well to this, many lacked the confidence to contribute despite positive reinforcement whenever they did. All the activities dealt with the children’s basic needs for learning and reinforced the

message that the school values and cares for them.”

Helen went back to the primary school several months later to re-survey the pupils. “On the day, we’d had considerable enthusiastic feedback from the children, so I was keen to find out if this positive uplift would make a difference overall. In the second survey, I was pleased to see that many of the factors, such as feelings about school, had significantly improved and attitudes towards attendance were better. Interestingly, the work seemed to have impacted more on the girls than the boys.”

“What I hadn’t expected to see was a dip in self-regard and response to the curriculum, particularly in the boys,” says Helen. “Due to the timing of this second test, we could see that it was a reaction to the fact that boys had found preparation for the SATs difficult. Knowing this means we can build specific activities around SATs time in the future to help the children cope better.”

Exploring capabilities

Helen has also undertaken a second piece of work using attitudinal surveys, which involves investigating any correlation between young people’s scores from the survey and impulsive risk taking behaviour. “Haydock Sports College has good historical *PASS* data. With teenage pregnancy and drug or alcohol misuse prevalent across the borough, it made sense to see if we could identify any trends.”

When it came to teenage pregnancy, the girls frequently scored poorly in attitude to attendance. “This was reflected in their actual attendance: more than half went to school less than one day a week by Year 11. But by looking at the survey results, we discovered that a significant number of girls dipped in their attitude towards coming to school as early as Year 8 and never recovered.”

“We also saw a strong correlation between our substance abuse cohort and *PASS*

data, with all learning factors flagged as areas of concern. While actual attendance rates didn’t seem to be affected, once again we observed low scores here. We also noticed that girls from this group began to score poorly in these areas earlier than boys, indicating that support for girls at an earlier age might be advantageous.”

Lessons learnt

Helen now plans to use the findings to inform potential future approaches. “Our cohort sizes were too small to draw any definitive conclusions, but we believe there is great benefit to be had by exploring competency-based initiatives to increase self-confidence in our pupils’ perceived ability to learn. We are also aware of different trigger times for girls and boys so can build this into our schedule.”

“Our pastoral leaders already undertake some fantastic work with the children, but they are not in a position to look at it from a strategic level. Using the *PASS* attitudinal survey means we immediately gain an insight into individual children’s requirements, whilst learning more about how to strategically inform improvement over their entire time in education.”

Key Benefits

- Provides insight into educationally linked attitudes and motivations of pupils
- Enables early intervention, increasing the likelihood of improved outcomes
- Reveals at risk ‘trigger’ times for strategic and operational support
- Results available individually and by cohort – gender, ethnicity, year group.

August 2011