



## **Community schools: families and communities at the heart of school life**

**Report title:**

Community schools: families and communities at the heart of school life

**Report details**

This report is written in response to a request from the Minister for Education in her remit letter to Estyn for 2019-2020. It focuses on highly effective approaches to community schooling taken by primary, secondary, all-age and special schools. The report is intended for the Welsh Government, headteachers and staff in schools, local authorities and regional consortia.

The focus of this report is on how community schools work in partnership with community organisations, statutory services and a range of specialist agencies to provide services that benefit pupils, their families and the community served by the school. In particular the report considers approaches taken by schools to:

- strengthen family and community engagement
- expand the use of their assets for the benefit of the community served by the school
- provide a range of services, including health and social services, through co-location or the provision of service hubs within the community

**Summary of Main Findings**

1. Leaders of successful community schools communicate a strong vision and sense of purpose, unpinned by a deep understanding of and regard for the communities served by the school. These leaders have strong values, based on a belief in inclusivity and the need to address inequity, and a determination to overcome challenges. The leadership in these schools is bold and tenacious, working in close partnership with families and communities to improve the life chances of children and young people. Leaders understand the specific social and economic challenges faced by their community, and the impact these have on their pupils and their families.
2. School improvement in effective community schools places family and community engagement at the heart of the planning processes. Parental and community engagement is recognised as one of the most important school improvement strategies, and is seen as integral to improving the wellbeing and achievement of pupils. There is a clear focus on engagement with families and with the community, on partnership working, and on the use of school facilities for the benefit of the wider community.

3. Successful community schools regularly evaluate the impact of their strategies to engage with families and the community. They keep abreast of changes in the community, such as trends in anti-social behaviour, and revise their approaches so they can mitigate the impact of these changes on their pupils.
4. Effective community schools provide targeted professional learning for all staff and governors. They recognise that the school's community approaches are the responsibility of all staff and partners, and understand their staff's and partners' development needs. These schools involve partners and the staff from other agencies in their professional learning, recognising that, in order to be a successful community school, all these professionals need to share common values, understanding and commitment to fulfil their joint vision.
5. Leaders and staff in community schools that have strong parental engagement build the skills, confidence and self-esteem of their parents. Well-designed family learning programmes help parents improve their ability to support their children. These programmes are often targeted to support parents to move onto employment or further learning.
6. Parent involvement is a key feature of effective community schools. These schools provide a range of support and advice and engage parents as partners in education. Parents are made to feel that, whatever their circumstances, they can turn to the school for support. Successful community schools treat all parents, irrespective of the challenges they face, with dignity and respect. In response, parents are proud of their school and want to work with staff to secure the best life chances for their children and for others in the community. Parents see the school as a place where they can access advice and support to help them resolve issues relating to their children or to wider concerns around housing, money, skills or family wellbeing.
7. Staff with specific responsibility for family and community engagement are key to the success of a community school. Leaders of effective community schools recognise the importance of appointing an individual or team to lead family and community engagement. These staff possess particular skills, aptitudes, knowledge and commitment, which ensure that they carry out their role with drive and sensitivity.
8. Effective community schools value their partnerships with a range of agencies including statutory and third-sector organisations. They know that without these partnerships they will not be able to provide integrated care, support or a wide range of experiences for pupils, families and the wider community. The relationship between these schools and their partners is characterised by mutual respect. School leaders and staff working in effective community schools understand the contribution that local and national organisations can make to their school and community.
9. Schools that establish strong relationships with families make it easy and safe for parents to access the school building. They create a specific area

in the school for parents and families to use, sometimes without the need for an invitation or appointment. These spaces are accessible, but in a location away from areas occupied by pupils, and are used in a variety of ways. For example, parents may use a family room to meet informally, engage in family learning, meet privately with family engagement staff, or attend parent group meetings.

10. Effective community schools make thoughtful use of school assets to improve the lives of children and families in the local community. They work in partnership with local groups and organisations in enterprising and creative ways. They seek to address gaps in local sport, cultural or care provision, including during the school holidays. Although the use of school facilities and resources by community groups brings income to the school, this is not its main purpose. In the best examples of asset use, leaders open up the school because they believe in the role of the school as a force that can help improve the community.
11. Schools with co-located services such as health, welfare and adult learning are committed to working with these partners to improve the lives of children and their families. These schools develop a tailored approach to co-locating services that meets the needs of the school, families and community. For instance, not all schools with co-located services have purpose-built facilities to house the services. In these cases, schools provide 'hot-desk' space for partners or access to parts of the school building on a regular basis.
12. The co-location of services enables community schools and their partners to share information and work collaboratively to address common challenges. This enables schools to provide swift support for vulnerable families and prevent the escalation of their difficulties. This is particularly evident when schools work closely with co -located Flying Start provision or other local authority services. Families who receive this support value the difference it makes to their quality of life.
13. Despite the evidence for the potential of community schools in the research literature and in government policy, the vision for community schools in Wales has not been realised in a comprehensive or sustained way. Over time, the concept of community schools has been interpreted in a variety of ways and this has left a legacy of different forms of provision. This provision was described in a report by the Public Policy Institute for Wales (2016, p.14) as 'largely un-coordinated at a local or national level'. Most developments are at school level, usually driven by individual leaders who have a strong moral purpose and an understanding of the value of working with families and communities.

**Recommendations:**

**Schools should:**

R1 Build strong partnerships with families as an integral part of improving the wellbeing and achievement of all pupils

R2 Refer clearly in strategic plans to how they will work with families, the community and partners to improve the wellbeing and achievement of all pupils

R3 Employ family and community engagement staff to work with families, the community and wider partners

R4 Work with the local authority and with statutory and third-sector partners to provide services that address the needs of families and the community, including co-locating services and utilising school assets

R5 Evaluate the impact of community school strategies

**Local authorities should:**

R6 Include in strategic planning actions on how they will develop authority-wide initiatives to support schools to be effective community schools

R7 Strengthen cross-directorate working to plan ways of locating a range of services in schools

R8 Ensure that 21st Century Schools planning considers the need for spaces / base rooms for family and community access

R9 Support schools to appoint family and community engagement staff, including developing a role description for these staff

R10 Provide professional learning opportunities for support school staff, governing bodies and strategic partners to develop community schools

The Education Directorate's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools and Colleges Programme team will write to local authorities to draw their attention to the recommendations placed on local authorities and on schools by this report.

**The Welsh Government should:**

R11 Develop a set of agreed, defining characteristics for community schools, and consider how schools are classified as 'community schools' and how this term is used to identify specific schools

R12 Promote the benefits of community schools, particularly in areas of disadvantage, with schools, local authorities and regional consortia

R13 Strengthen the expectation for including actions on family and community engagement in school strategic plans

R14 Refresh national guidance on community schools, using the Family and Community Engagement Toolkit (FaCE), and provide guidance on how schools can evaluate and improve their community school strategies

R15 Ensure that 21st Century Schools and Colleges Programme planning, guidance and building standards take into consideration the need for spaces for family and community access

Welsh Government response:

Accept: The Welsh Government accepts the findings of the Estyn report.

Schools play a vital role within communities, and we need to ensure that they are not only fit for purpose but also able to cater for the needs of local communities.

In 2019, we announced funding of £15 million for schools to build an additional twenty community hubs and learning centres. This continues to support a number of pilot approaches, for example adapting existing buildings for wider community use, increasing the size of a school hall, or providing specialist or sporting facilities which can be used by local people. The funding will also be used to create spaces that meet a specific need within the local community, such as learning new languages or vocational skills.

We will evaluate the twenty pilot projects funded under the Community Hubs capital fund and disseminate the outcome so that good practice is shared more widely. We will also develop, test and publish resources, including guidance and case studies, so that schools and colleges can access further support and ideas to develop a community-focused approach.

We have rebranded the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools and Colleges Programme, under which the Community Hubs pilot programme sits, with the strapline “developing learning spaces for communities”. The second phase of the programme, which was launched in April 2019, will see a further investment of £2.3 billion to transform the school estate. This funding will recognise and build upon the key role played by school buildings, not only as places to educate our children, but also as centres to be used by wider communities. A key focus of the second phase will be to transform schools and colleges into hubs for wider learning and local activities, challenging and supporting schools, colleges and communities in Wales to work together to put these facilities at the heart of their communities.

Through our business case guidance and regular stakeholder engagement for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools and Colleges Programme we continue to highlight the need to consider planning of community and family space in all projects.

We will continue to promote the benefits of community schools through our stakeholder networks and seek to refresh guidance to include the Family and Community Engagement Toolkit (FaCE), and how schools can evaluate and improve their community school strategies

**Publication details.**

The report will be published on 7 July and can be found on ESTYN’s website <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/thematic-reports>

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.  
This document is also available in Welsh.



Digital ISBN 978-1-80038-926-7

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WG41009