

# The unusual suspects



Schools are forging links with social services and other agencies to address problems head on. Nic Barnard reports.

#### At a glance

- The pending Children's Bill and *Every Child Matters* require a closer link between schools and agencies.
- Agency partnerships involve health workers, welfare officers and community police.
- In-school social workers eliminate the need for lengthy external referral times, during which problems can escalate.
- New children's services directorates should help reduce tensions between educators and social services on funding.
- Success depends on agreeing common goals and values up front.

**Some schools may feel** they spend much of their time fighting fires. At Rawmarsh Community School in Rochdale, they actually call the fire brigade.

Explains Deputy Headteacher Lesley Hutt: "On my desk this morning, there was a note that two kids had lit a fire in the community. "I picked up the phone and a community fire officer was in by 11.30am showing them a horrendous video about the consequences of arson."

Rawmarsh is reaping the benefit of several years spent forging an extensive network of links with other agencies in the town.

MIND, the mental health charity, runs a weekly drop in centre. A confidential in-school health advice service

has just begun, run by local nurses, a GP and youth workers. Outreach services for parents and carers are being developed.

And a new team at the school is working to bring together everyone from educational psychologists and youth workers to neighbourhood wardens and community police officers.

Rawmarsh and Rotherham LEA are part of NCSL's community leadership network that is helping share good practice such as this across the system.

As such, they have a head start on the Children's Bill, the legislation currently making its way through parliament which envisages far-reaching changes to the way schools operate. ▶

More information

To download the DFES document *Every Child Matters* visit [www.dfes.gov.uk/everychildmatters](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/everychildmatters)

► **New political agenda**  
After a decade spent focusing on the standards agenda, school leaders are being asked to start working in partnership with other agencies, from health and social services to police and probation.

The bill and its preceding green paper, *Every Child Matters*, are part response to the Victoria Climbié enquiry. But they are also driven by the personalised learning agenda.

The new national standards for heads include a duty to “collaborate with other agencies” for the benefit of pupils and their families.

“The landscape schools are working in has extended quite dramatically,” says Maggie Farrar, NCSL Assistant Director of Leadership Programmes. “They are beginning to realise they can’t transform the life chances of young people alone.”

The full service school is at the centre of this agenda: one is planned for every local authority, usually

combining a wide range of social, health and community services on a single site. But multi-agency

working can take a number of guises and, for school leaders looking for good practice to draw on, it is perhaps more common than widely realised.

The well-established healthy schools network already links teachers with a range of partners, from primary health trusts to sports clubs to farmers and supermarkets.

The benefits are well established: heads say better diet and more exercise improve children’s ability to work, while lessons on pupil safety and assertiveness raise self-esteem and make schools calmer and more secure.

Neighbourhood Sure Start projects and the growing number of children’s centres already bring together education, health and social services in a one-stop location for parents.

**Rapid response**

For Lesley Hutt, working in a school serving a tough community with low aspirations, collaboration is about preventing problems before they get out of hand.

“We might identify a need – say a family bereavement or a separation where the child is exhibiting signs of estrangement.

“By the time we’ve made a referral for counselling or social services, it’s three or four weeks later and the problem has grown. There’s a risk of exclusion, of drug taking.

“Now that we have the professionals in place, there’s a rapid response which eliminates the need for these external referrals.”

That is a view echoed by Neil Wilson, Head of Newall Green Community School in a deprived estate on the edge of Manchester, where

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dedicated social workers, education welfare officers and health workers are based permanently on site.

Parents, he says, would rather discreetly seek help at the school than face the stigma – real or imagined – of being seen at the social services.

“There are an awful lot of parents who will not go to social services,” he says. “By doing low-level work at a fairly early stage, you’re saving an awful lot of time, effort and money later on.”

It’s also a better service, he believes. “If they go to social services, they might be seen five times by five different people.”

But embedding the concept of multi-agency working in schools will take energy and commitment, says Maggie Farrar, who oversees NCSL’s community leadership programme. “There is some good work going on, but it’s still quite fragile.”

She has been leading scoping sessions that bring together leaders from schools and other sectors and agencies to explore the opportunities for, and barriers to, multi-agency collaboration.

**Barriers to partnerships**

Structures and hierarchies offer barriers to collaboration

which can be used as an excuse. Different agencies seem to speak different languages, work to different timescales and priorities and have difficulty sharing information.

“They all have a view of what they stand for, and they will defend this – it’s why they joined their specific profession in the first place,” Farrar says.

Then there are the twin devils of targets and money. “Some schools say as long as their performance is measured in league tables and exam results, that is what they will largely focus on.”

Health professionals take a similar view of their priorities – waiting lists for example.

Competition for limited funds, particularly between education and social services, remains an issue.

However the new children’s services directorates, which will bring education and social services together in local authorities, should help.

At Rawmarsh, Lesley Hutt says school leaders are pushing for Rotherham council to set up a common fund for multi-agency projects to alleviate such competition.

The school has tapped into a host of funding streams to start projects such as a family health adviser, whose duties

will range from family outreach work to PHSE lessons on health education.

Other initiatives are the proposed pastoral outreach worker trained in spotting signs of abuse or mental health problems; an on-site community police officer; and the crèche bus which makes it easier for parents to get to the school to meet teachers or access services.

**Long-term impact**

To co-ordinate all this activity, a community and family services manager sits on the senior management team, to enable teachers to keep their focus on teaching and learning. But the pressure is on to prove results.

“We don’t want a person to get established in a post and then leave after two years,” Hutt says. “We need to prove that it’s had an impact on referrals or exclusions and that it works as a preventative measure.”

Barriers can be overcome if the will is there, particularly at ground level. But it’s vital to do the groundwork, Farrar urges.

Many initiatives flounder because too little time was spent establishing common goals and values. The result was poor communication, mistrust and professionals protecting their patch.

But, she adds, different agencies also have much in common – particularly health and education, both marked by a renewed focus on outcomes and on meeting the individual’s needs.

“All I hear from talking to education, health and social care is their real commitment to making this work for the benefit of young people. That’s one agenda we have in common.”

