Curriculum and Assessment Review: Call for Evidence

Place2Be response – November 2024

Questions

12. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation (class ceilings) for learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage?

Widespread evidence shows that children experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage are up to 4.5 times more likely to struggle with their mental health. Mental health difficulties represent a barrier in improving attainment, progress and participation at school. Research shows that children with better wellbeing are more likely to achieve better academically. Children with mental health difficulties, and those who are living in poverty, are also more likely to be persistently absent from school, and are therefore less likely to achieve the expected standard of reading, writing and maths and less likely to achieve the higher grades at GSCE, according to DfE reports. The Place2Be report "School for All: Solutions for School Attendance" also found that these young people lose out on peer connections, community and access to trusted adults. Improving mental health is a key way to overcome these barriers, which can be achieved through reforms to the curriculum.

13. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation which may disproportionately impact pupils based on other characteristics (e.g. disability, sexual orientation, gender, race, religion or belief etc.)

Boys face barriers at school that inhibit their attainment, progress and participation. Within Place2Be's services in secondary schools we see fewer boys in both one-to-one counselling and self-referral appointments compared to girls. Without effective support, boys are more likely to struggle with their mental health, therefore affecting their school attendance, engagement and attainment.

Boys' struggles with their mental health often manifest more externally, with boys presenting in our mental health services with issues around behaviour, impulsivity, mood swings, anger and self-destructive thoughts/actions. We also see more boys (62%) than girls (38%) involved with our Personalised Individual Parenting Training (PIPT) which is designed to support parents to manage a child's challenging behaviours. This behaviour means boys are more likely to be excluded or suspended from school, as per DfE data. This negatively affects their attainment, future opportunities and can result in vulnerability to criminal exploitation.

14. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers in continuing to improve attainment, progress, access or participation for learners with SEND?

Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are more likely to struggle with their mental health. Mental health difficulties are a barrier in improving attainment, progress and participation at school. Government research shows that children with better wellbeing are more likely to achieve better academically. Children with mental health difficulties, and those with SEND are more likely to be persistently absent from school, and are less likely to achieve the expected standard of reading, writing and maths and less likely to achieve the higher grades at GSCE. The Place2Be report "School for All: Solutions for School Attendance" also found that these young people also lose out on peer connections, community and access to trusted adults. Improving mental health is a key way to overcome these barriers, which can be achieved through reforms to the curriculum.

Challenges accessing SEND support such as an education, health and care plan (EHCP) can also negatively impact pupils experience and ability to engage with learning. Alongside effective mental health support, these pupils need easy and effective access to SEN support.

15. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any enablers that support attainment, progress, access or participation for the groups listed above?

Improving mental health support and information in schools is an enabler to overcoming barriers in attainment, progress, access and participation in education for the whole school community.
The children in the groups listed above are more likely to struggle with their mental health and/or face barriers accessing services and could therefore most benefit from targeted mental health interventions in school.

In 2024 Place2Be research "Investigating the academic attainment and progress of children in receipt of individual counselling" compared academic outcomes of primary school pupils who received one-to-one counselling, against a control group of pupils with similar characteristics. The findings showed that children between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 who received counselling kept pace academically with their peers, despite being known to have mental health difficulties We can assume that mental health support could help to mitigate some of the negative impact of mental health difficulties on a child's attainment at school.

Mental health interventions can also support behaviour, engagement and participation at school. In 2022 University of Cambridge analysed of data from 6,700 pupils supported by Place2Be with one-to-one counselling. The study "From a child who is a problem to a child who has a problem" found a significant reduction in school exclusions among those pupils in the academic year the counselling took place: 74% of the students who had a fixed period exclusion before counselling had fewer reported exclusions in the year they attended counselling. Students also had better mental health after counselling, measured by teachers in the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.

This shows that this support benefits not only the individual child but also their peers. The whole school community also benefits from an environment at school that prioritises inclusion and wellbeing under a whole school approach to mental health. By embedding mental health within school culture, we help young people develop the tools to support, develop and sustain good mental health.

To overcome barriers in attainment and engagement we also need to make schools places where young people want to be. We achieve this by creating a broad curriculum that enriches young people. We also need to give children access to play, art, sport and creativity in school. This improves their mental wellbeing and also helps young people build social connections. The Department for Education should allocate more funding towards programmes that bring enrichment, extra-curricular, and pastoral opportunities into school settings, in line with the Government's manifesto commitment on arts and creativity in school.

22.Are there particular curriculum or qualifications subjects where: a. there is too much content; not enough content, or content is missing; b. the content is out-of-date; c. the content is unhelpfully sequenced (for example to support good curriculum design or pedagogy); d. there is a need for greater flexibility (for example to provide the space for teachers to develop and adapt content)?

Please provide detail on specific key stages where appropriate.

Mental health support embedded in the school culture and backed up through the curriculum helps create a whole school approach to mental health. This approach means the whole school community understand how to manage their emotions and recognise when to seek support. This also creates a school culture that is positive and inclusive, which can prevent mental health issues from arising.

The curriculum is one of the eight principles of a whole school approach, as per DfE guidance. Progress has been made in embedding mental health support in the curriculum, and the revised RSHE curriculum contained enhanced teaching on suicide prevention. This is a welcome measure. However across the country, the guidance on a whole school approach to pupil mental health is not followed consistently. By putting mental health support within the national curriculum we can remove these gaps.

Evidence shows that confidence in teaching about wellbeing and mental health remains low among school staff. The DfE's "Relationships, sex and health education Implementation of the 2020 curriculum guidance in school" found that 13% of teachers do not feel confident teaching RSHE lessons on mental wellbeing. School staff need greater support to deliver excellent and comprehensive lessons on mental health and wellbeing, backed up by clarity and flexibility in the curriculum.

The same DfE paper found that 65% of schools use external experts to deliver lessons on mental health. This can be positive, as third sector organisations such as Place2Be have a wealth of experience and knowledge working directly with young people, delivering age-appropriate and evidence-based sessions with classes.

When pupils feel that the lesson content is applicable to their own lives they are more likely to engage – so it is key that mental health topics within curriculum are adaptable to pupil experience within the school and allow staff to respond to issues that arise.

It is also important that wellbeing is embedded throughout the whole school, and not just taught within RSHE lessons. This would give greater status to mental health and support de-stigmatising it.

25.In which ways does the current primary curriculum support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for life and further study and what could we change to better support this?

With a revised curriculum that embeds mental health, we could support children to build resilience, confidence, communication and emotional literacy – which are pillars of strengthening mental health protective factors in the future and preventing mental health difficulties. Giving children these socio-emotional skills also benefits future learning. By teaching young people how to cope with difficulty and manage their emotions, we can ease transitions to secondary school.

To build children's skills and abilities we need to create a broad curriculum that enriches young people. Children should have access to play, art, sport and creativity in school. This is particularly beneficial for younger pupils to support with social-emotional development through creativity and play, improving their mental health and building connections. These are vital skills needed throughout a person's life that benefit their future employment and contributions to the economy.

School-based mental health services are shown to benefit the economy: Pro Bono Economics found that for every £1 spent on Place2Be's services in primary schools generates £8 for the wider economy.

26.In which ways do the current secondary curriculum and qualification pathways support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work and what could we change to better support this?

Through the curriculum we can support young people to build resilience, confidence, communication and emotional literacy – which are pillars of strengthening mental health in the future and preventing issues from arising. School-based mental health services are shown to benefit the economy: Pro Bono Economics found that for every £1 spent on Place2Be's services in primary schools generates £8 for the wider economy.

A solid foundation of mental health, built through a school that values inclusion and teaches young people about mental health in the curriculum, helps to create a future generation of employable, highly skilled and capable young people. These young people are better equipped to enter the workforce and contribute to economic prosperity. This is particularly pertinent given the expansion of Artificial Intelligence where the workforce needs to remain adaptable and resilient, with compassion and communication at the core. If young people leave school with these skills, we can reduce those who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) and relieve the economic burden of mental health difficulties on future employers.

To build on young people's skills and abilities we need to make schools places where young people want to be, so that they engage with learning. We can achieve this by creating a broad curriculum that enriches young people. Young people also benefit from access to art, sport and creativity in school. This improves their mental wellbeing and also helps young people build social connections. This gives young people a more well-rounded offer and skills to contribute to society.

37. Are there other changes to the statutory assessment system at key stages 1 and 2 that could be made to improve pupils' experience of assessment, without having a negative impact on either pupils' learning or the wider education system?

We understand that children and young people find assessments stressful. However, worry and stress are normal emotions and cannot be removed from life altogether. Instead, we should equip young people with the tools needed to cope with stress and build resilience. Place2Be offers practical resources for teachers, families and schools to help young people learn how to manage these, so that minor worries do not escalate into mental health difficulties.

46.Should there be any changes to the current accountability system in order to better support progress and incentivise inclusion for young people with SEND and/or from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds? If so, what should those changes be?

We believe the purpose of Ofsted inspections should be to assess how effectively a school is developing and educating its student population, preparing them in a holistic way for their future lives. This includes supporting and enabling their wellbeing, building resilience, and equipping them with the life skills needed to thrive. Ofsted should place less emphasis on rigid academic targets, and include assessment of how schools positively support pupil wellbeing, development, and inclusion. We welcome the commitment to do this in the upcoming inspections framework review. This is the basis of a whole school approach to mental health. We recommend that Ofsted works with a positive and constructive approach with schools to validate and help them to improve.

The Department for Education should work with Ofsted and use their influence to promote positive school cultures through: introducing guidance and a framework on inclusion in education; implementing the programmes from the Transforming Children's Mental Health green paper; and utilising NICE guidance on Social, emotional and mental wellbeing in primary and secondary education.