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Arweinyddiaeth Addysgol Cymru
National Academy for
Educational Leadership Wales

Discussion Paper

The role of educational leadership in achieving the vision of Community Focused Schools in Wales

Ysbrydoli Arweinwyr - Cyfoethogi Bywydau
Inspiring Leaders - Enriching Lives



Ariennir gan
Lywodraeth Cymru
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Introduction

The purpose of this discussion paper is to delve into a critical and timely question: “What is the role of educational leadership in achieving the vision of Community Focused Schools (CFS) in Wales?” This enquiry undertaken by Associates of the National Academy for Educational Leadership, aims to shed light on the pivotal role that educational leadership plays in realising the ambitious goals set forth for CFS within the unique context of Wales. In a rapidly evolving educational landscape, where the interplay between schools and their surrounding communities takes on increased significance, it is essential to understand the dynamic role of leadership in achieving educational and societal transformation.

CFS in Wales are at the forefront of educational innovation and social progress. They envision a future where schools are not just centres of learning but also vibrant hubs that foster collaboration, engagement, and sustainable community development. Achieving this vision requires a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted leadership practices and strategies that can catalyse positive change.

Background

In their capacity as Associates of the National Academy for Educational Leadership their mandate was to conduct a commission into the attitudes, apprehensions, and aspirations of educational leaders in response to the Welsh Government's Policy of the CFS concept. It was decided that educational leaders meant collating broader perspectives than just that of school leaders. The Community Focused Schools policy has been developed in collaboration with a broad range of stakeholders including past and present Associates of the National Academy for Educational Leadership who played an integral role in the steering and enquiry groups. The external referencing group met regularly to review all parts of the policy and were invited to feedback on the key documents and guidance.

The commission started with a period of reconnaissance and initial inquiries to understand the Welsh Government's vision with respect to CFS. This included an examination of extant documentation. The primary objective was to gain an understanding of the guidance and its intended outcomes, spanning from a micro-local and regional context to a macro-national and international level.

The enquiry extended not only to educational institutions within Wales but also to international educational settings, notably the United States and Singapore.

As the collective comprehension evolved with respect to the historical, extant, and future objectives within the framework of the CFS vision, the cohort of Associates crafted a set of questions and topics for discussion. These tools informed a series of semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, including leaders in the domains of education, social services, youth development, healthcare, and the third sector.

Within this repository, recurrent themes, central questions, and diverse perspectives surfaced. Universally, the interviews revealed an overwhelming endorsement of the Welsh Government's vision, values, and aspirations in relation to CFS. Stakeholders, across the board, stated these objectives were intrinsic to the well-being of children, adolescents, and the broader communities they serve.

However, within the overarching optimism, it became evident that there concerns over the role of educational leaders in the practical realisation of the vision. Scepticism persisted, stemming from prior attempts and the protracted existence of this conceptual framework within the Welsh Government's policy landscape for a span exceeding two decades. Additionally, there was a sense of trepidation funding mechanisms for CFS, particularly within the current financial environment. Furthermore, educational leaders expressed reservations concerning the equitable allocation of resources, the facilitation of extracurricular learning initiatives, and their precise responsibilities regarding the anticipated co-location of various services.

It should also be noted that, during the project, supplementary guidance was issued by Welsh Government on CFS.

Definition of Educational Leadership

For this commission, the term educational leadership was taken to refer to all leaders within Wales who have a collective responsibility for the learning and well-being of children and young people through education.

This includes:

- Welsh Government
- Middle tier (Estyn, National Academy for Educational Leadership, Regional Consortia and Local Authority etc.)
- Leaders in schools and childcare settings
- Leaders of services with direct responsibility for the education and well-being of children and young people (Social Services, Youth Work, Voluntary, Health and Third Sector etc).

Definition of CFS

Whilst undertaking the enquiry it became clear that further work needed to be done in clarifying the definition 'Community-focused school' in Wales. Whilst there is a definition and model in the guidance this was interpreted in different ways by leaders. The confusion was also highlighted in there being multiple descriptions and characteristics of what a CFS is perceived to be (e.g. Estyn 2020 identifies 8 characteristics of what constitutes CFS). The enquiry showed how the policy and guidance had been received very differently across the regions depending on how it had been introduced and used. Associates identified that Los Angeles have developed a clear definition that has been embedded into policy and practice over a period of time. The research of Dr Steve Constantino and his '5 Simple Principles' have influenced the countries approach and can support our next steps in Wales.

Literature Review

As part of the project, the Associates collated all the documentation published by the Welsh Government in relation to CFS since devolution (as listed below Table 1).

Table 1. Chronological timeline of the Welsh Government Community Focused Vision

Date and name of document	Key messages from document
1997 Devolution National Assembly Wales	The concept of community schools has been part of Welsh education policy since the early years of devolution.
2001 NAW 'The Learning Country'	Children who participate in Out of School Hours Learning do better than would have been expected from baseline measures in academic attainment, attitudes to school and attendance at school (MacBeath et al, 2001). In 2001 the National Assembly for Wales published 'The Learning Country' which advocated schools developing closer relationships with the communities they serve. "We want schools to act as a community resource – not just in school hours but out of hours and in vacations as well".
2003 NAW Community Focused Schools initiative	<p>Desforges and Abouchar research 'The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment (2003) found that:</p> <p>14.9% of pupils' lives is time spent in education (based on good attendance from pupils). The rest of their time is spent in their home environments and communities.</p> <p>At the age of 7, parental influence on learning is 6 times that of the school. At the age of 11, parental influence is 30 percent greater than that of the school.</p> <p>In summary, parental involvement is a significant factor in shaping educational outcomes.</p> <p>At this time, the National Assembly for Wales established the Community Focused Schools (CFS) initiative. The circular defined a community school as one that provides a range of services and activities, often beyond the school day, to help meet the needs of its pupils, their families and the wider community. Grant funding supported schools to provide activities and services that encompassed childcare, lifelong learning, language provision, health and social services, cultural and sporting activities, play service for children and young people, out of hours learning, work experience, services for the community and access to IT resources (National Assembly for Wales, 2003).</p>
2007 Estyn Transforming Schools paper	The Estyn discussion paper, Transforming Schools (2007) acknowledged that schools were 'beginning to work more closely with partners, opening their doors to the community and building links with families'.
2010 NAW The Learning Country	<p>The Learning Country: a comprehensive and lifelong learning programme for 2010 written by National Assembly for Wales (2010) makes explicit reference to community schools. The policy document refers to the desire to see 'a much closer relationship between schools and the communities they serve'.</p> <p>Specifically, the policy outlines the ambition that schools should be rooted in a wide community context and 'integral to community capacity building – providing a base for delivering, not just education and training but also a range of other services like family support, health and enterprise promotion'.</p> <p>From 2010, engagement with families and the community has been the main contributory factor to addressing the national focus of tackling the impact of poverty and disadvantage on educational achievement.</p>
2013 Welsh Government School Governors Guide to the Law	Welsh Government School Governors Guide to the Law (Chapter 27) (2013b) upheld the community focus school definition and goes on to identify key services to be provided by a community school as childcare, lifelong learning, health and social services provision, cultural and sporting activities, youth services, out of hours learning and community services.

2014 Welsh Government Rewriting the future: Raising ambition and attainment in Welsh schools	<p>In 2014 Welsh Government’s ‘Qualified for Life’ report stated, ‘most schools and colleges know that working with parents/carers, employers and their communities is an important part of what they do to support their learners to achieve their potential’. This aligned with Welsh Government’s programme ‘Rewriting the future: Raising ambition and attainment in Welsh schools (2014). Family and community engagement was one of the four themes of the programme and aimed at raising the educational attainment of children from deprived communities. In addition, the programme called to make all schools ‘community schools’.</p>
2015 Welsh Government FaCE: the challenge together toolkit	<p>In response to requests from schools for help to plan and deliver effective family and community engagement as part of a whole-school approach, ‘FaCE the challenge together: Family and community engagement toolkit for schools in Wales’ was published in 2015. This provided schools with guidance and practical resources on how to engage with families of underperforming children and children from deprived backgrounds who have little support for their learning at home.</p>
2017 Welsh Government Prosperity for All: the national strategy	<p>More recent Welsh Government policy, <i>Education in Wales: Our national mission (2017-21)</i>, refers to the potential of community schools in Wales. It’s <i>Prosperity for All: the national strategy (Welsh Government, 2017b)</i> recognises that ‘public services and voluntary sector partners need to work together towards common objectives, to focus on the needs of people, at all stages of their lives and in all parts of Wales.’ The vision articulated in <i>Prosperity for All</i> introduces a ‘new model of Community Learning Centres providing extended services with childcare, parenting support, family learning and community access to facilities built around the school day’ (Welsh Government, 2017b, p.16). Welsh Government published the National Professional Leadership Standards in 2017. Developing and strengthening family and wider community engagement and partnerships features across most of the five elements.</p>
2020 Estyn Community Schools	<p>In July 2020 Estyn published its post-pandemic report 'Community schools: families and communities at the heart of school life'. The report calls for schools to strengthen family and community engagement, expand the use of their assets for the benefit of the community and introduce co-location of services. It outlines defining characteristics of community focused schools as well as effective approaches and case studies.</p>
2022 WG Community Focused Schools Guidance	<p>This leads us to the newly published Community Focused Schools Guidance and model Nov 2022 which Welsh Government have committed to endorsing and supporting.</p> <p>This was the guidance that was available at the time of the enquiry being captured.</p>

Associates undertook reconnaissance and review of existing policy literature; this then informed the creation of some initial enquiry questions. A series of questions were piloted with leaders across all educational sectors. They were then refined to the following.

1. What is the definition of a CFS?
2. What is the vision for CFS? How will you go about implementing it?
3. What needs to be done to secure commitment and equity?
4. Could other services have CFS in their remit?
5. How will other services support CFS with depleted provision in these areas?
6. What are the barriers to the successful implementation of CFS?
7. Is CFS for all schools or schools with high levels of areas of socio-economic deprivation.
8. How will schools maintain a focus on teaching and learning?
9. During Covid the remit of schools changed and the accountability processes for teaching and learning were paused. Has the remit for schools changed post Covid?
10. Has an impact assessment been completed to protect leader’s wellbeing and workload?
11. What are the evaluations of current funding pilots e.g. extending the school day, community focused manager and family engagement officer?
12. Will ESTYN report on CFS?
13. How does the WG define deprivation?

Data Collection

To capture a diverse range of perspectives, questionnaires, individual interviews, and focus groups were conducted with identified stakeholders, encompassing educational leaders, community representatives, and professionals from various sectors. Additionally, the Associates facilitated discussions with the Welsh Government and middle-tier representatives. Engaging in professional discussions further enriched the discourse, while a thorough stakeholder analysis helped map out key influencers and interests. Notably, the Associates expanded their knowledge beyond Wales, with two Associates visiting Los Angeles and one visiting Singapore, thereby incorporating valuable international perspectives into their enquiry.

Following the data collection period the Associates analysed the data gathered and agreed on the following recommendations below:

Recommendations

1. Strategic planning and funding:

Reframe the title 'Community Focused Schools.'

The concept and guidance for CFS places a potentially unintended emphasis on this being a vision for schools and not a cross service collaboration to engage families and communities for the benefit of children and young people. If we are to see it is the responsibility of all educational leaders, then the title needs to make this clear. The guidance states.

'The need for all stakeholders to help develop and realise the vision for the school, families and communities.' This is far more than just a role for school leaders.

There is a significant risk that the phrase CFS excludes key stakeholders and hinders the concept of collaborative leadership, disempowering other partner agencies whilst automatically placing the onus of responsibility on school and educational leaders.

An alternative title should explicitly indicate that this is a joint vision for all services and stakeholders and that there is accountability on all leaders of services in Wales to work together to achieve the community focused vision.

Schools cannot be solely responsible for the successful implementation and delivery of CFS.

Ensure cross sector policy and accountability for a Community Focused Approach.

Welsh Government should create a cross-sector policy with explicit joint accountability for the delivery and success of a Community Focused approach.

All sectors linked to children and young people should be aligned to the vision, guidance documents and eventual policy for Welsh Government's ambition for CFS to be achieved.

Clearly defined roles and responsibilities for each of the educational leaders e.g. Health, Education, Children's and Social Services are necessary to ensure collaboration and clarity of responsibility.

Accountability measures should be similar across sectors in relation to Community Focused policy and expectations.

The responsibility for a Community Focused approach to tackling poverty on educational outcomes cannot be the sole responsibility of headteachers and school leaders.

Schools are an integral part of the CFS hub but NOT the hub itself.

Prioritise and systematically support school leaders' workload and well-being.

Currently educational leaders are leading, managing and implementing significant policy changes in relation to fundamental and transformational pedagogical approaches e.g. Additional Learning Needs, Curriculum for Wales, the Race Equality Agenda etc. Whilst the CFS guidance refers to an alignment with each of these policies, leaders are concerned about the practicalities, resources, and funding. Again, there is a need for collaborative leadership between leaders to enable all of these changes to come to fruition. The Community Focused golden thread should be explicit in all cross-sector Welsh Government sector policies to ensure that leaders across sectors understand their collective responsibility.

Educational leaders raised operational concerns in relation to premises management responsibilities, accessibility, safeguarding and financial implications.

Greater clarity regarding the collective responsibility and accountability of stakeholders, e.g. health, will ensure a true collaborative model that is not detrimental to the well-being and workload of school leaders.

Full consideration for the well-being and workload of leaders should be a priority (e.g. a workload impact/stress management assessment). Due consideration needs to be made to the recruitment crisis we face of leaders in Wales.

Without exception, educational leaders interviewed have positive vision and ambition of CFS to support ALL learners and recognise the benefits of this approach. However, the vast majority of school leaders that contributed to the enquiry had concerns in relation to workload and well-being and questioned whether the additional responsibility and accountability of CFS should lie with Headteachers.

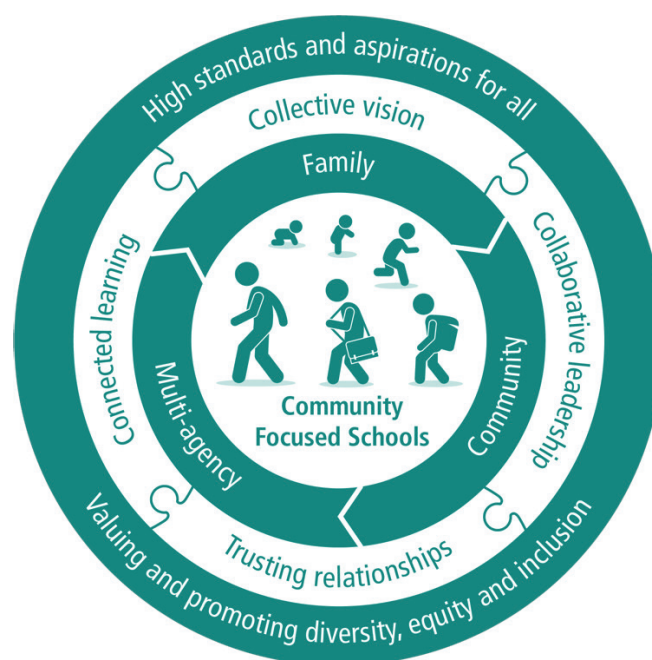
Ensure that Welsh Government policy, planning and funding is strategic, transparent and sustainable.

The current Welsh Government guidance (Nov 2022) is helpful in supporting schools to understand the characteristics and benefits of community focused working.

However, Welsh Government action is necessary to secure the commitment of all partners (e.g. health, social services).

Policy should outline clear responsibilities and accountability for the middle tier, in driving and facilitating the CFS agenda at a local level.

The WG CFS guidance model:



Overall, schools are successful in developing creative and innovative models for family involvement and engagement. This is generally done with small amounts of funding, good will and school leader commitment. To ensure the successful delivery of the second and third pillars Welsh Government policy should clearly define the responsibility and accountability of other services.

Local Authorities should develop a transparent and equitable model for CFS which facilitates effective collaboration amongst school leaders, services and partners to understand the needs of their communities. This includes a strategic planning and evaluation process for grant funding.

Welsh Government should ensure that policy, planning, funding and accountability do not result in unintended biases, graded systems or a competitive structure that works against the principles of collaboration.

Educational leaders expressed confusion over the intended remit of Welsh Government CFS guidance. The guidance states that CFS is 'a key part of the wider policy for tackling the impact of poverty on educational outcomes' (page 1), then goes on to state 'we want all schools in Wales to be CFS' (page 2, emphasis added). This requires greater clarity.

Strategic funding is a significant concern for many school leaders. It is suggested that there is inequity within the current pilot and that this model is not sustainable in the long term, unless there is funding to support staffing and delivery. Leaders felt that all schools should have equity of access to the services to support all vulnerable families not only those defined as being under financial deprivation.

Strategic funding for CFS should not undermine current school funding systems and create a vulnerability which would potentially impact the most deprived families and pupils in both the short and longer term.

Full evaluations of current CFS pilots need to happen across Wales and these findings need to inform policy changes. Equity of grant funding and policy pilots such as the community manager, family engagement officers, need to inform ongoing strategic funding that ensures equity for all.

2. Collaborative Leadership:

Accept collective responsibility and shared accountability for a 'Community Focused School.'

Leaders from all services and sectors should accept collective responsibility for the successful implementation and delivery of CFS and understand their collective responsibility and accountability.

All service / sector policies, strategies and approaches should be aligned to the Community Focused approaches outlined by Welsh Government. Clear planning for CFS to ensure a joined-up approach that supports children, young people, families and their communities.

All leaders should collaborate to create the vision, priorities and agreed outcomes for the community.

The collaborative vision should consider and include the views of all within the group whilst accepting that the best outcomes for children/families should be at the heart of decision making.

Service leaders should not make assumptions about the needs of the community and not assume knowledge. They should work collaboratively with other services to understand the context, know their assets and work collaboratively to support pupils/families. Professional humility is a powerful attribute when learning and understanding the role of other services for the interest of the community.

Establishing a stakeholder group ensures equality and equity of voice and that communities' needs are met. Accountability for this group should be at the local authority level not the stakeholder level.

Clear and concise frameworks to audit assets are already available but need updating. Frameworks should not be used by educational leaders as a tick box tool and should not be linked to accredited schemes/awards as this promotes competition not collaboration.

Whilst frameworks can be a helpful tool in auditing and developing a pathway for community focused school working, school leaders should not be held to account regarding this framework, nor should it be used to compare schools.

Leaders should include the voice of the children, young people and the community.

All leaders recognised that children and young people's future prosperity (in line with Welsh Government vision for 'Well-being of future generations continuous learning and improvement plan', Curriculum for Wales etc.) is at the heart of the vision for CFS.

Children and young people should be identified and included as key stakeholders in the decision-making processes for a community focused approach, shifting the balance of power and giving them ownership to have a say in identifying and providing for their needs.

The UNICEF Rights of the child agenda should be considered during all planning and decision processes in relation to policy, implementation and accountability.

Collaborative work should support school leaders to concentrate on their core educational responsibilities.

Current guidance should be reviewed and strengthened to include and support commitment and accountability from other stakeholders.

Schools should also be open to new ways of working with additional services such as the youth service, and respect each other's roles (e.g., School leaders allowed to prioritise the learning needs of pupils). However, school leaders believe there is an expectation to back fill the capacity issues within other services. This has been exacerbated during and post pandemic, where there has been a blurring of the lines between childcare and teaching and learning. This is unsustainable for schools. The ASCL response September 2022 to 'The Programme for Government 2021-2026', that commits Welsh Government to "Invest in the learning environment of Community Focused Schools, co-locating key services, and securing stronger engagement with parents and carers outside traditional hours", acknowledges the erosion of services and that schools alone, cannot solve issues of child poverty.

In some cases, schools engaging in multi-agency and community work are reliant on goodwill rather than strategic planning and use of funding which does not offer a long-term sustainable model. In order for the ALN Bill to be successfully implemented, multi-agency working is a statutory requirement and this has implications that need further researching and exploring within the CFS remit.

3. School Leadership:

Collaborate to understand the context of their own school and community.

CFS is neither a bolt-on nor confined to areas of deprivation. Indeed, it is integral to school improvement, future generations and community growth.

School leaders, therefore, require support to profile their communities and to work collaboratively with stakeholders to understand their context, know their assets and identify their needs.

Despite the term 'Community Focused Schools', educational leaders should understand that schools are an integral part of the hub but not the hub. Collective ownership and responsibility are crucial to a community focused approach.

Educational leaders should ensure they understand the roles of schools and services so each can capitalise on the opportunities to learn from each other to secure improved outcomes for all learners.

Leaders should collaborate to find meaningful ways of evaluating the impact of community work.

Collaborate with other sectors to implement the local CFS vision.

School leaders should exhibit humility and be prepared to listen to the expertise of other sectors and understand that the community is often best placed to identify its own needs and the support required.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the enquiry undertaken by the Associates of the National Academy for Educational Leadership underscores the acknowledged significance of CFS in elevating aspirations and standards across all educational institutions. However, the findings reveal a critical imperative: the realisation of CFS cannot be borne by school leaders alone, or by those leaders acting in isolation. Instead, it demands a paradigm shift towards collaborative leadership across sectors, emphasising the indispensable role of collective efforts in the successful implementation of CFS. The commissioned enquiry highlights a concern regarding the capacity of educational leaders to enact key elements of CFS, pointing towards the need for targeted support and professional development. Furthermore, the study identifies a substantial challenge in the form of workload and well-being, emphasising the importance of addressing these factors to ensure the advancement and sustained success of CFS. In essence, this conclusion emphasises the transformative potential of collaborative leadership and highlights the urgent need for comprehensive support structures to empower school leaders in fostering the vision of CFS.

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