

Report summary

The impact of virtual schools on the educational progress of looked after children

The educational attainment of looked after children continues to be considerably worse than the attainment of the rest of the school-age population. To help improvement, many local authorities have chosen to appoint a virtual school headteacher (or someone with a similar title), often supported by a virtual school team. This followed an evaluation of the piloting of this approach in 11 local authorities. The virtual school approach is to work with looked after children as if they were in a single school, liaising with the schools they attend, tracking the progress they make and supporting them to achieve as well as possible.

This report examines the impact of virtual schools, established by local authorities to support and improve the educational achievement of looked after children. The report draws on evidence from cases and from the views of carers; children and young people; professionals, including local authority managers and social workers; and representatives from schools, colleges and the voluntary sector in nine local authorities.

Key findings

- Most outcomes were improving in the local authorities visited, although performance was variable from year to year. There was little evidence, however, that the gap in attainment between looked after children and other children was narrowing. Progress between Key Stages 3 and 4 was slower than during earlier key stages.
- Financial constraints had resulted in several local authorities recently reducing the number of dedicated posts within the virtual school, raising concerns that continued improvement would be threatened.
- The potential consequences of these cuts had not always been fully assessed, despite the acknowledged link between educational outcomes and other key outcomes for looked after children, such as placement stability and emotional well-being.

- Corporate parents' depth of engagement with issues relating to the education of looked after children was variable.
- Clearly stated roles and responsibilities for virtual schools were not always evident.
- Data management systems were of variable quality, which meant that some local authorities were not able to monitor and report on the progress of children and young people.
- The resources of the virtual school were not always effectively targeted.
- Inspectors saw evidence of very effective support involving the virtual school that not only made a difference to children's educational progress, but also often enhanced the stability of their placements and had a positive impact upon their emotional well-being.
- The quality of personal education plans was variable. The best examples retained a sharp focus on educational attainment while taking into account emotional and behavioural issues. Targets were sometimes ill-defined and insufficiently tracked.
- Children placed outside of the local authority area were less likely to receive good support from the virtual school.
- Schools, other professionals and carers valued highly expert support and challenge from virtual school teams and from virtual headteachers who had strong leadership skills, the necessary 'clout' to be able to access resources and a high level of professional credibility.

Main report published 11 October 2012
www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120165

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No. 120165

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