

**Message of support from the Minister for Education:**

**'Investors in Families' Annual Conference'**

**Thursday 21 March 2019, Sophia Stadium, Cardiff**

Good morning everyone and firstly can I thank Chris Waterman and his team at liF for your kind invitation to your annual conference - both on behalf of myself and my officials. I have heard great things about the previous events liF has held in Cardiff and I am very grateful to you all for your continuing commitment to bringing together school and home by helping families engage with their children's learning in schools and the wider school community.

And of course it is wonderful to see from the agenda that so many schools are joining you today to celebrate the excellent results you have all achieved. Events like these really do demonstrate the importance of family engagement in children's learning and I know you have a really entertaining and productive day planned.

We know that parents and carers who have the confidence to support their children's learning have a significant effect on their achievement. Research has shown that this factor alone can have more influence over their child's education than the quality of the school they attend.

And given that children only spend about 14% of their time in school, perhaps this shouldn't come as so much of a surprise.

As parents and carers ourselves, we all know the value of praise, the importance of developing number knowledge, reading strategies and, most importantly, spending quality time with our children. And I know that valuing and supporting the important role that families play in the life of the child, as well as promoting social inclusion and a sense of wellbeing through positive participation in a child's education, are factors which are emphasised in your excellent Investment in Families programme.

Of course, as well as increasing educational attainment generally, engagement is an essential tool for narrowing the attainment gap between learners from richer and poorer backgrounds – and I am sure you all know I have long been committed to ensuring that no learner is disadvantaged by his or her background or parents' socio-economic status.

As you might imagine, on my travels around Wales I visit schools from very different communities - each with their own particular strengths and weaknesses. And believe me, I've seen at first hand the powerful impact family engagement can have, particularly where it is part of a whole school approach.

More than ever, schools are realising just how much family engagement matters in a child's education. We want all families to realise that schools cannot educate their children in isolation and that family participation is essential.

As long ago as 2015, we published our *Family and Community Engagement (FaCE) Guidance and Toolkit* which contains practical resources for schools to help them strengthen their approaches. I know many schools have found this to be really useful for developing family engagement strategies and as a useful audit tool to take stock of their current arrangements and how they might be improved.

Our *Education Begins at Home* campaign also encourages parents to engage in their child's learning from the earliest time. Now in its fourth year, *Education Begins at Home* retains its original aim which is to encourage parents, carers and guardians to do more of the little things at home that will make a big difference to their child's development and education.

Our *Families First* programme continues to promote the development of multi-agency systems of support for families, particularly those living in poverty, with an emphasis on early intervention and prevention. The approach taken by *Families First*, and the *Team Around the Family* model in particular, is making a real difference to family outcomes and can have a transformative effect on family life.

We've recently refocused parts of the programme to ensure it is able to do more to support parents, children and young people to build their resilience and confidence and achieve positive wellbeing.

*Prosperity for All*, our national strategy, recognises that confident, positive and resilient parenting is fundamental to preparing children for life and the importance of providing help and support to parents. We expect Local Authorities to provide families with access to information, advice and support of various kinds to suit a range of needs, and we understand that parenting and family support services will look slightly different in every area. Our guidance sets out our expectations on how it should be provided.

Another Welsh Government initiative, *Parenting. Give it time*, is a further channel through which parents can access high quality information and advice on positive approaches to raising children. Four families from across Wales have been selected as the new faces of *Parenting. Give it time*. They are sharing their personal experiences of bringing up a young family on the *Parenting. Give it Time* website and Facebook page. We hope that other parents will benefit from their stories.

As you might imagine, family and community engagement has strong links to other key policy areas including in particular the health and well-being agenda - currently the focus of much attention. So I would like to take this opportunity to update you on progress in this area.

In September 2017, we published *Our National Mission*, which sets out how our education system will move forward in the next 5 years.

As I'm sure you will all know, a critical component of *Our National Mission* is a new curriculum, which will have a new focus on children and young people's health and well-being at its very core. One of the four purposes of the new curriculum is to support them to become healthy, confident individuals. And I'm sure I don't need to tell any of you at today's event how important having a strong supportive family is in

helping children develop self-confidence and resilience.

As part of the development of the new curriculum, pioneer schools have considered how the school environment supports children and young people's social, emotional, spiritual and physical health and well-being. We want to ensure all children and young people are supported to be physically and emotionally ready to learn and have a safe environment in which to do so.

However, the curriculum alone won't fix everything. If we are to properly ensure learners' well-being we must put the necessary support structures in place to promote and support positive mental health. It's a sobering thought that at any one time, one in 10 children suffer from a mental health problem - that is 3 in any average sized class.

For some years now Wales has been ahead of the curve in supporting mental health for children and young people. We have already made counselling available for learners in year 6 and all 11 to 18 year olds.

Young people are growing up in a world where they feel under enormous pressure. So we have to address their inner confidence, their resilience and grit. Experiencing challenging situations and also new feelings, is part of growing up and we need to be very careful not to medicalise the whole experience.

Whilst a lot of support can be provided by parents and the wider family, schools have a huge role to play in supporting children and young people to maintain or develop positive mental health. Encouraging help-seeking behaviour should be part of every schools ethos. Encouraging behaviours like eating properly, being physically active and getting enough sleep is really important. Encouraging hobbies, whether art, or IT, or drama, all help build confidence and perseverance. And this of course is something on which families and schools can work together to foster that sense of belonging, so that learners feel part of a community.

When children are struggling, seeking help and talking about difficult feelings is the first step towards feeling better. Sometimes young people find it hard to talk to parents and carers about their feelings. So a teacher or other member of the school staff can be that trusted adult they turn to for help in difficult situations.

That is why in the new curriculum we have asked schools to make sure they support children and young people's social, emotional, spiritual and physical health and wellbeing.

Together we will put the necessary support structures in place to promote and support positive mental health. And if we are to succeed, we'll need schools to place greater emphasis on this than perhaps they have ever done before.

We have also made additional funding available for 3 pilot projects (in North East Wales, North Gwent and South Powys, and Ceredigion), where dedicated child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) professionals will work with pilot schools.

The pilots will provide teachers with on-site help and support and help ensure appropriate and timely referrals for young people who need more specialist support. The evaluation of these pilots will help us see if this approach works and whether it should be rolled out more widely.

We know that some children and young people who experience difficult family and other health-related problems (we call them Adverse Childhood Experiences - ACEs for short) can develop problems which last for a long time - sometimes for the rest of their lives. That is why the Welsh Government and Public Health Wales are funding an ACE Support Hub. This will help everyone understand and learn more about ACEs, and where necessary encourage them to change the way they think and how they behave.

The ACE Support Hub supports teachers and other professionals working with children and has developed specific training material for schools.

Since the publication of the Children, Young People and Education Committee's *Mind over Matter* report in April 2018, we have reflected on what more we can do to accelerate the pace of the good work already taking place in this area across Wales.

We agree with the Committee that further action needs to be taken and have agreed a new focus on a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing for children and young people to support wider and ongoing reforms of mental health support.

We are confident that a whole school approach will ensure that mental health and wellbeing becomes central to the way schools work and that the school ethos will support the broader mental health and wellbeing of learners, which in turn will help to prevent other issues from developing or escalating, including mental health issues.

In order to take this work forward, a Joint Ministerial Task and Finish Group has been formed and held its first meeting in October last year. The meeting brought together key strategic stakeholders from across education, health, the wider public and third sectors. Following a second meeting earlier this month, we are now moving this agenda forward at pace, knitting the various strands of activity together; highlighting gaps in provision; and ensuring energy and resources are targeted to have the maximum benefit.

But coming back to today's event it's so very rewarding for me to know that because of the support of Investors in Families, many more families and schools are working together to deliver and achieve really positive local impact, and positive benefits for our children.

It is my hope therefore, that liF will continue to replicate its success in other schools across Wales, because, as you will gathered from my words here today, supporting children's wellbeing is of course everybody's business. It's not just down to parents or schools or social services or health professionals.

We all have a role to play and just by being at today's event, each of you has demonstrated your willingness to participate.

In closing, I want to confirm my wholehearted commitment to developing and supporting education policy that brings families and schools together for the good of all children in Wales.

I thank you all and I hope the rest of today is really productive and, of course, highly enjoyable.