

# Alternative Education Provision



# ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROVISION (AEP)

## Introduction

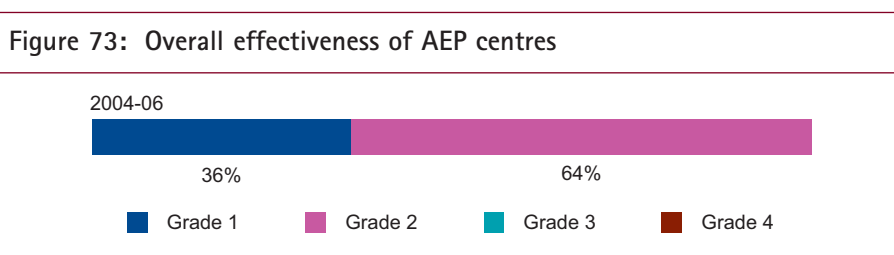
363. During 2005-06, the Inspectorate recorded 39 AEP centres providing education for some 930 pupils aged 11-16 years who were not attending mainstream schools. These pupils have increasingly complex behavioural and social difficulties, including drug and alcohol-related problems. Many of them are involved with juvenile justice and a growing number are under the care of Health and Social Services. A very small, but worrying, number of pupils self-harm and need appropriate counselling support.
364. It is clear that for many of these young people the education provided in their schools holds little of interest or value. There is evidence that appropriate pastoral and counselling support, and more flexible curricular provision, can help to settle many of them back into mainstream education. Schools need to accept greater responsibility for these pupils and for addressing the difficulties that prevent them from participating in, and benefiting from, education.
365. The Children and Young People Funding Package (CYPPF) includes provision for additional counselling support with the potential to improve matters for pupils at risk of exclusion.
366. During the period of this report, DE and OFMDFM commissioned research<sup>17</sup> by the Queen's University Belfast to help guide the future planning of AEP. The findings showed that six months after leaving AEP, well over three-quarters of the young people who had attended the provision were engaged in employment, training or further education.
367. Many of the young people faced considerable social challenges which influenced greatly their ability to do well in school. The schools needed more support to help them deal with the social and environmental difficulties these pupils experienced outside of school. There was a need for greater intervention at primary school level

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<sup>17</sup> *'Out of The Box' Alternative Education Provision*, Kilpatrick, R. et al, 2006, Queens University Belfast

and for a stronger, preventative role for the Educational Welfare Service, which did not have the resources to cope with the extent of the existing problems. The researchers highlighted the ease with which schools could disconnect themselves from responsibility for these young people as a key element in the failure to keep them in school. Many of the young people interviewed by the research team did not understand fully why they failed in mainstream education.

368. The good progress made by many of the young people in AEP was often the result of the work of highly motivated and skilled AEP staff. The research findings were consistent with those reported by the Inspectorate.



369. What are the main strengths in AEP?

The main strengths are:

- the positive attitudes of the staff towards the pupils and the focus on their individual needs;
- the imaginative teaching approaches, including small group discussion and team-teaching in partnership with youth and community workers;
- the flexible curriculum and organisation;
- the efforts made to overcome barriers to learning arising from family or other circumstances; and
- the involvement of the pupils in determining the curriculum content and in developing rules and procedures to direct the AEP centres' work.

370. What further improvements are needed?

The main actions needed to bring about further improvement are:

- agreeing a clearer definition of AEP;
- ensuring that mainstream schools have the resources necessary to support pupils at risk before they are excluded;
- ensuring that moving pupils to AEP is a last resort and part of an agreed process of support;
- making better formal links between AEP centres and post-primary schools to help pupils return to school where possible;
- developing a monitoring system to track pupils' progress and improvement during, and beyond, AEP placement;
- securing the involvement of additional support services from DHSSPS and the further education sector;
- providing better training and job security for AEP staff;
- improving the accommodation and resources; and
- funding the provision more adequately.

371. Most of the teaching in the AEP centres is sound with some good or very good features. Where the teaching is of a high standard, the staff demonstrate a good knowledge of the young people's social and educational needs and are sensitive to their circumstances and previous experience in school.

372. Good leadership and management are strong features of the most effective provision and are demonstrated through skilful communication, high expectations of achievement, and expertise in dissipating challenging behaviour. While much of the accommodation and resources are less than satisfactory, the staff make good use of existing facilities. Problems with transport are common in the centres under voluntary management.

373. The task of educating young people who are out of school is complex and challenging. It is a tribute to the staff of the AEP centres that much of the provision inspected is of good quality. A majority of the young people gain accreditation and develop the skills necessary to enter further education, training or the world of work.

374. All of the key stakeholders need to work together better to develop a clear strategic framework that integrates AEP within post-primary education and supports effectively young people at risk of exclusion from school. To this end, DE has set up an AEP forum in response to the issues raised by inspection. Much more needs to be done to ensure that fewer young people become disaffected with education and then drift away from school.