

Children's Scrutiny Committee
Alternative Provision Scrutiny Review
Notes of Scrutiny Visit
The Boxing Academy – 18 March 2016

On 18 March 2016 members of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee visited The Boxing Academy, a provider of alternative provision based in Hackney.

The visit was attended by Councillor Kaya Comer-Schwartz and Mary Clement; Gabby Grodentz, Head of Alternative Provision and Jonathan Moore, Senior Democratic Services Officer. The visit was hosted by Anna Cain, Chief Executive and Head of The Boxing Academy.

The following main points were noted during the visit:

The Boxing Academy

- The Boxing Academy had been based in Hackney since 2010 since it grew out of a boxing gym in Tottenham. The charity was founded in 2007 and initially accepted ad hoc referrals from the Police and youth offending services.
- Following positive engagement with schools, the Academy grew from 12 pupils in 2007 to 42 pupils in 2008. It was typical for providers to experience rapid growth as schools were keen to refer pupils to successful providers.
- Although the Academy was fundraising and looking to expand, it was considered that the intensive support offered by the Academy was facilitated by its small scale and class sizes and this was the key to the Academy's success. Although additional funding could be accessed by admitting a greater number of pupils, the Academy did not wish to compromise its effectiveness by significantly expanding.
- Each class was comprised of eight pupils and was assigned a 'pod leader', a boxing mentor who was able to provide one-to-one support both inside and outside of classes.
- The pod leader acted as a teaching assistant and attended all lessons to provide a level of consistency. Consistency was important to Boxing Academy pupils. It was commented that mainstream schools could enforce discipline inconsistently, whereas the Boxing Academy addressed behaviour consistently with some form of punishment. Punishments were not usually severe; the primary intention was to demonstrate that negative behaviour always had consequences. Typical punishments included press-ups or being tasked with a chore such as washing up. Rewards were given for positive behaviour.
- It was explained that many pupils had a negative view of teachers but developed a strong relationship with their pod leader who sought to change their attitude to education.
- Examples were provided of how the Academy's approach to discipline varied from that of mainstream schools. An example was provided of one instance which was turned into an educational opportunity. After a minor incident for which no pupil took

responsibility, the Academy held a “court” in which pupils provided evidence, argued their case and acted as a jury before the guilty pupil was identified.

- It was noted that schools in Hackney referred pupils directly to The Boxing Academy. There was no corresponding local authority alternative provision service.
- Members toured the Academy premises. The Academy was in a small building, with a boxing gym in the basement. There was a dedicated classroom for each subject area, as well as a reflection room and break out area. The Academy was in the process of expanding to an adjacent building.
- The Academy ran an after-school boxing club. Pupils were required to wear headguards and the Academy was required to hold relevant insurances.
- Boxing training was a good way for pupils to maintain fitness. The majority of pupil training consisted of fitness exercises as opposed to sparring. The Academy measured pupil health, including regular ‘weigh-ins’ and taught pupils about sports nutrition. All pupils were able to study for a coaching qualification.
- Boxing was occasionally used for conflict resolution. An example was provided of a disagreement on the classroom seating plan being resolved through sparring.
- A number of pupils had previously exhibited violent behaviour. Although some questioned the logic of training these pupils to fight through boxing, it was explained that boxing required a great deal of control and taught pupils how to handle their aggression. Regular training provided pupils with an outlet for their violent behaviour. As a result, Boxing Academy pupils tended to fight less than they did before their referral. All staff were trained and authorised to physically restrain pupils if required, however there had only been one violent incident in the last five years.
- As a small provider the Boxing Academy did not provide counselling on site, however made referrals to external agencies where appropriate. It was noted that pupils often confided in their pod leaders and staff had received training on how to help pupils with sensitive issues.
- All pupils were searched every morning for banned items such as cigarettes, drugs and junk food.
- All pupils were provided with a free healthy lunch prepared by a local school.
- The Academy had no outdoor space however some pupils were allowed to spend 20 minutes off site over lunch.
- It was noted that pupil attendance was often poor prior to referral and tended to improve at The Boxing Academy. It was thought this was due to the Academy’s family feel, positive atmosphere, and the relationship between pupils and their pod leader. The Boxing Academy offered pupils a fresh start and worked hard to make pupils feel at home. Pupils were punished if they arrived late and if required would be collected from their home.

Pupil assessment and attainment

- All new pupils were assessed by the Academy using the Yellis system, which measured aptitude for learning. It was commented that many other providers used an alternative system which was preferred by the Department for Education, however the Academy considered this to be insufficiently detailed. Yellis included a cognitive assessment and provided a broader assessment of the pupil.

- Yellis assessments indicated that the attainment of new Boxing Academy pupils was below average; however pupils were generally not too far behind. Pupils who had an unusually low score were referred to an educational psychologist.
- All pupils were considered to have special educational needs as they were not in mainstream school. Speech and language difficulties were widespread, to the extent that all Boxing Academy pupils would receive speech and language support in the next academic year.
- In 2015 the Boxing Academy achieved its best-ever exam results; with 72% of pupils achieving five A*-G GCSEs including English and Maths. 55% of pupils achieved at least two grade C passes, and all pupils attained at least two GCSEs. The Academy worked with the council's alternative provision service to set pupil targets.
- Due to the small class sizes the curriculum was able to be tailored to individual pupil needs. Mock exams were held which identified areas to focus learning.
- The Boxing Academy did not offer functional skills qualifications. Although some providers offered these qualifications, the Boxing Academy considered that these qualifications were not valued by colleges and employers and required as much work as GCSEs. Officers noted that the providers offering functional skills qualifications often focused on vocational education, as the functional skills qualifications were able to be taught within the context of vocational pathways.
- It was queried what work was undertaken by the Academy to assist pupils with transitioning to their destination post-16. Pupils had access to careers advice and the Academy organised open days to colleges and helped pupils to choose appropriate courses and prepare for interviews. If pupils did not receive the required grades to be admitted to their chosen course then the Academy would negotiate with colleges to have pupils admitted to study at a lower level.
- The Academy ensured that all pupils had a destination post-16. It was commented that of the 22 pupils graduating from the Academy last year, 20 were studying in college. One pupil had dropped out of college and another was in custody.

Quality evaluation

- Officers provided further information on the alternative provision quality evaluation process. It was noted that the evaluation criteria were weighted so that safeguarding and teaching and learning had a greater influence on the providers' overall rating than other criteria, such as health and safety.
- Officers had very regular contact with providers and for this reason it was thought that the council's quality evaluations were accurate. Officers had a good relationship with providers and knew from experience if providers were not presenting an accurate representation of their provision.

Suggested improvements

- Members spoke with Marika Morrison, the Academy's Inclusion Manager with responsibility for pastoral care and careers, who had previous experience of working in pupil referral units.

- Members noted the council's intention to reduce the number of pupils referred to alternative provision and queried what mainstream schools could do to support pupils who would otherwise be referred. In response, it was advised that the support offered to pupils by schools varied, however pupils referred to alternative provision often needed intense support which was difficult to provide in mainstream schools. Of those schools which provided support to pupils, it was thought that this was sometimes offered too late. The small class sizes in alternative provision enabled staff to notice small behavioural changes which may not be noticeable in mainstream schools.
- The value of pastoral support and providing pupils with life skills was emphasised, as was the importance of engaging struggling pupils in their own education. It was suggested that many pupils in alternative provision did not understand the purpose of education and work was needed to rectify this.
- It was suggested that mainstream schools were not creative with punishments and relied on detentions to enforce behaviour. As schools were only able to detain pupils for 15 minutes without previously informing parents, schools often required pupils to attend detention a few days after their misbehaviour. It was commented that this was not useful for pupils referred to alternative provision, who needed immediate consequences for their behaviour in order for punishments to be effective.
- It was noted that schools tended to have a "hands off" approach once pupils were referred and considered that their responsibility had been delegated. Teachers did not visit the Academy aside from quality assurance visits. It was suggested that schools could learn about behaviour management techniques and how to support pupils from alternative provision providers.
- It was noted that many pupils did not think highly of their mainstream school and would not want to meet school staff.
- Although schools did not regularly visit providers, schools did engage with the council's alternative provision service and met with officers at least three times a year. The service also provided half-termly reports to schools.
- Members spoke to a governor of the Academy who had worked at local schools and was previously an Assistant Head for Inclusion and SENCO. The governor suggested that mainstream schools, particularly primary schools, could have a greater focus on speech and language issues. Such issues were widespread amongst alternative provision pupils and it was thought that this contributed to underachievement and consequential behavioural issues.

The views of pupils

- Members interviewed a male pupil from Islington. He spoke of his aspirations to become a lawyer or policeman.
- The pupil advised that was unsure about the Academy at first, however felt comfortable at the Academy within a couple of weeks.
- The pupil had previously been involved in fights outside of school and this was a factor in his referral. He commented that boxing training had taught him respect, developed his confidence, and as he knew he was able to defend himself he no longer felt the need to prove this through violence.
- The pupil found the smaller class sizes helpful and commented that he wasn't able to misbehave in a small class due to the level of attention from the teacher.

- The pupil reported that his parents had noticed an improvement in his behaviour.
 - The pupil reflected on his previous negative behaviour in mainstream school. He explained that at one stage he found the work too easy, so he started to misbehave, however this led him to fall behind. He commented that there was a lack of discipline at his previous school.
 - The pupil believed that he would be in prison if he was not referred to the Boxing Academy.
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- Members interviewed a female pupil from Hackney who advised of her poor attendance in mainstream school. Her attendance had significantly improved at The Boxing Academy.
 - The pupil had difficulty concentrating for long periods of time. In mainstream school she would walk out of lessons without permission, however The Boxing Academy allowed her to take a short break midway through lessons when required.
 - The pupil commented that there was no discipline or boundaries at her mainstream school. She suggested that the rules changed too frequently and teachers enforced them inconsistently.
 - The pupil had previously been violent at school however had significantly calmed down since being referred to The Boxing Academy. She commented that this had improved her relationship with her family. She felt relaxed and that boxing had given her strategies to direct her anger.
 - The pupil spoke of her intention to attend college and her professional ambitions. She advised that her mainstream school did not support her career choice and told her that she would not be successful due to her behavioural issues, however The Boxing Academy was much more supportive and had given her hope and the belief that she could succeed.
 - The pupil felt engaged in her education and her grades had improved since her referral. She commented that the Academy was pushing her and she was determined to make them proud.

Members thanked The Boxing Academy for contributing to the scrutiny review.

Children's Scrutiny Committee

Alternative Provision Scrutiny Review

Notes of Scrutiny Visit

City and Islington College (Camden Road Campus) – 22 March 2016

On 22 March 2016 members of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee visited City and Islington College, a provider of alternative provision located on Camden Road.

The visit was attended by Councillor Kaya Comer-Schwartz and James Stephenson; Gabby Grodentz, Head of Alternative Provision and Jonathan Moore, Senior Democratic Services Officer. The visit was hosted by Anne Farrell, curriculum leader for Alternative Provision.

The following main points were noted during the visit:

City and Islington College

- City and Islington College was a further education college which also provided alternative provision to pupils in Years 10 and 11. The college admitted 12 alternative provision pupils who were based in a dedicated unit and taught separately. Pupils were required to attend between 10am and 3pm.
- Alternative provision pupils studied English and Maths alongside media, business, leisure and tourism. The college also worked to develop the life skills and social skills of pupils. Media work included the production of videos and radio adverts.
- The college had recently secured sports equipment for the exclusive use of alternative provision pupils. Off-site sports activities were provided weekly in conjunction with the Soebell Leisure Centre.
- Alternative provision pupils were able to study GCSE English and Maths if they were academically able, however the majority studied functional skills qualifications at Levels 1 and 2 as they were more likely to succeed. It was thought that some pupils would not be able to achieve any pass grade at GCSE and the college did not wish for the pupils to fail. Those studying at GCSE level were taught English and Maths in other classes. It was noted that one pupil had wished to study at GCSE level however was not permitted to as he was referred too late in the academic year.
- It was commented that many alternative provision pupils would go on to study vocational qualifications and it was appropriate to study for functional skills in this context. Some pupils went on to study higher level courses at the college and could act as role models for alternative provision pupils. Some pupils would study GCSEs after they passed their functional skills qualifications.
- The college sought to provide pupils with a safe and welcoming environment. The majority of learning took place in the alternative provision classroom, which was surrounded by a number of other rooms including an office for staff, an administration room which pupils could work in alone, a reward room which featured games consoles and other equipment, a media studio and a small garden. The reward room could be also used to provide educational experiences. For example, if playing a

video game, pupils would plan how they were going to play, and then evaluate their performance afterwards.

- Alternative provision pupils were able to mix with other college pupils. The college was keen to remove the stigma associated with alternative provision and the pupils had the same rights as any other. It was suggested that mixing with pupils of other ages and backgrounds was particularly beneficial for alternative provision pupils.
- Pupils had recently arranged visits to major tourist attractions. To develop pupil confidence and communication skills, pupils had been responsible for contacting the attractions and negotiating group discounts.
- The college held “enrichment” sessions for alternative provision pupils, providing them with opportunities and experiences they may not otherwise have access to. Pupils had previously participated in go-karting, climbing and fencing.
- Due to pupil behavioural issues and other difficulties, it was commented that particular skills were required to teach alternative provision classes. The pupils worked with few teachers which provided consistency across subject areas.

Tour of the college

- Members met with Lee Kennedy, Media Teacher, and toured the college. Members visited the library study area, welfare services, the students’ union offices, the college radio station, the careers service and individual study spaces.
- Pupils had access to youth workers, counsellors and the college’s mental health advisor.
- All alternative provision pupils were provided with free school dinners regardless of eligibility. Pupils were not allowed to bring energy drinks onto the premises.
- The students’ union hosted talks from outside agencies on topics such as gang violence, healthy relationships and sexual violence, however it was noted that attendance was optional and alternative provision pupils tended not to engage in such sessions. It was commented that alternative provision pupils enjoyed debating issues, but often on their own terms.
- Alternative Provision pupils had produced adverts for the college’s radio station.
- Members spoke to the college’s security team. The security team welcomed all pupils to the college every morning and had worked especially hard to develop good relationships with alternative provision pupils. The service was on first name terms with the pupils and had established a level of trust and respect. Security officers had previously advocated on the behalf of pupils to teachers.
- The careers service provided support tailored to each cohort and could assist with choosing further education courses and CV writing.

The views of pupils

- Members interviewed the alternative provision pupils about their experiences at the college. Pupils welcomed that the college environment provided them with more freedom than mainstream school and recognised the benefits of smaller class sizes.
- All pupils were aware of their current level of attendance. Pupils knew that this was important and was being monitored. Pupil progress on qualifications was also displayed in a prominent location in the classroom.

- Pupils appreciated the relationship with the security team and respected their authority. Pupils commented that they could “banter” with security, and they knew that security officers would look out for them.
- Pupils were asked if they preferred the college or mainstream school. All but one preferred the college. The pupil who did not prefer college suggested that school allowed him to mix with more pupils his own age and offered a greater academic challenge.
- Some pupils advised that their parents would prefer them being in mainstream school.
- Some pupils knew what they wanted to do post-16. Some wanted to remain in college; one was seeking a painting and decorating apprenticeship.

Suggested improvements

- Some pupils entered the college with a negative view of alternative provision. Their schools had used the threat of referral as a punishment and some pupils considered that they had failed because they had been referred. This problem was compounded by the pupils not studying GCSEs, as mainstream schools emphasised that GCSEs were an essential requirement for colleges and any future employment. College staff thought that if pupils had the mind-set that they had been referred for their own benefit and that alternative provision was going to provide them with new skills and experiences then they would be far more likely to succeed.
- It was commented that the council’s school improvement team did not have a dedicated behaviour specialist. It was suggested that helping schools to effectively manage behaviour would assist pupils who were at risk of referral to alternative provision.
- The college valued the council’s “information passport” referral process, however interviewed all pupils prior to referral as this was the most effective way of assessing pupil needs. The importance of providers comprehensively assessing pupils was emphasised.

Members thanked City and Islington College for contributing to the scrutiny review.