

Ysgol y Berwyn

Family learning and study support – responses within a rural setting

The small Gwynedd town of Bala, situated at the southern extremities of Snowdonia, nestles on the shoreline of Wales' largest natural lake. The town and surrounding area is proud of its rich Welsh heritage and culture.

The local secondary school, Ysgol y Berwyn, is an 11-18 predominantly Welsh speaking coeducational school. It serves a low economy area, where 90% of the 460 pupils come from a home background served by agriculture and its related industries.

The economy of the community is also reflected in the curriculum through NVQ Agricultural Studies and Construction courses. Both make well-established use of local contractors and farms. These courses are offered to pupils intending to find employment locally.

More recently, in response to the growing importance placed upon the potential outcomes of Family Learning and Study Support, innovative practice has been developed that may be of interest to schools in rural settings beyond the boundaries of Wales. These are as follows.

1. An ICT 'Farm administration' family learning course

The School became aware that poor administrative skills were resulting in local farmers not getting grant aid to which they were entitled. After consulting with the two farming unions and the local agricultural college, the response has been two-fold.

Firstly, a basic ICT evening adult education course has been offered to the local farming community. Secondly, and concurrently, parents and pupils are encouraged to attend jointly a Welsh medium ICT course in Farm Administration. Fifteen families have signed up for the course.

2. 'Sheepdog handling' family learning course

Until the interruption of the lambing season, the School's Agricultural Department, had been running a Sunday morning Sheepdog Handling course for pupils and parents, with some of the latter being both learners and helpers. This culminated in the participants planning and staging their own Sheepdog Trial, which attracted an entry of almost 70 handlers and their dogs, from across North Wales – Bala already hosts the largest sheepdog trials in North Wales. Next year, in addition to establishing the school's Sheepdog Trials as an annual event, it is also proposed to encourage the pupils and parents to play an active role in planning and staging the town's major event.

3. 'Sheep management' study support programmes

The School has its own small farm in its grounds, with a flock that averages at around 30 sheep. However, as the management of sheep is not restricted to term times, the following programmes have been promoted for the pupils:

1. sheep shearing (both hand and mechanical) at a local 'partner' farm

2. a 'lambing care' programme over the Easter holiday – the School's herd of sheep is sent out to 'partner farms' to ensure 24-hour supervision.
3. rearing and preparing sheep for auction at local markets; this includes participation in 'the sales'
4. grooming a small number of the herd's 'black sheep' for a series of 'country shows' held during the summer holidays.

This programme demonstrates the purpose of education to those pupils who might not aspire to academic careers that take them away from Bala. It also brings the school, parents and community together to work for the long-term benefit of all concerned.

A £3,000 award from Education Extra has helped to contribute to some of the above initiatives.

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