

Virtual School Newsletter

Welcome to the Autumn 2015 edition of the Virtual School Newsletter.

Since our last newsletter, The Virtual School for Looked After Children and Care Leavers has undergone some changes. Sharon who has done a sterling job in helping us with our PEP documents has left to take up a post as a personal assistant for adults with special educational needs. Our thanks and best wishes go with her. Jodie, who is her replacement started in November and is well underway in settling into the team. We also have another new member of the team, Bobby, who is our EET Adviser; he's here to help support our older young people and care leavers with finding education, training and employment.

At the start of the school year we moved from the 4th to the 11th floor at the Civic Centre. Not that we have had much time for gazing out of the window, but on a clear day the views are stunning and we are able to see London's modern landmarks: the tall buildings a reminder that our work is to keep high aspirations for all our children and young people. We are delighted to see good test and examination results coming through and congratulate our students and all those whose efforts have helped them to achieve well. We also like to celebrate the progress made by our students with Special Needs. Often, the ability to undertake the very tasks many of us take for granted, have been achieved with sterling efforts and determination. Thank you to all who are working, in so many different ways, to raise the aspirations for and of our children and young people, each one as individual as the buildings in the distant skyline.

This year, for a variety of reasons, The Virtual School will not be sending Christmas cards. However our greetings for the festive season are just as heartfelt.

With all good wishes

Kathy Goodman
Head Teacher

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Room 13 Art Group

This year a group of our children and their foster carers have been taking part in creative art workshops with David and Louise, two resident artists, to produce some personal and unique art. The sessions have been taking place in Room 13 at Aragon School in Morden.

Room 13 is part of an international network of independent art studios. Here, artists of all ages are encouraged to be creative, think for themselves and pursue their interests. The artists in residence act as mentors and teach artistic skills.

The children and adults have been experiencing a stimulating exchange of ideas and skills that allows them freedom to release creative potential! And we are seeing some budding artists emerge! Some amazing art pieces have been produced: from making small individual clay faces and drawing self-portraits in pencil, to big colourful collaborative pieces of The World in Space!

Currently the group is working on making mosaic pictures using coloured foam. The skill will then be transferred to making an image using tiny ceramic tiles and grout!

The group certainly have enjoyed the experience so far and the sessions will continue into the next academic year, exploring new ideas and concepts. So if you're interested to join them, please do not hesitate to contact the Virtual School to book your place!

The inviting art studio opens its doors on the first Tuesday of every month providing the perfect setting for making art!

The whole body of work will culminate in an exhibition, of which details will follow.

Rosa Ashton



Have you noticed some changes?

You may have recently received letters from school explaining about the changes in the support for children with Special needs.

These changes came into place in 2014 and will impact children who already have a Statement for special needs and those applying for one.

Changes you may come across

- For a child who already has a Statement, you may begin to see the acronym- EHC plans being used. This stands for an Education, Health and Care plans and these will now be taking the place of an SEN Statements.
- Any child or young person who currently has an SEN Statement will be transferring on to an EHC plan. Local authorities are doing this slightly differently, so check with the SEN department of the local authority your child is going to school in.
- In Merton the EHC plan writing will be part of the Annual review that is called a transition Annual review and the school will let you know about this in writing before the next Annual review.
- For a child who needs additional support for their special educational needs there will be a process of assessment, as before. This process of assessment involves parents and carers in a more direct way. You will be invited to a meeting and be able to specify the sort of support you think will best support your child e.g. with a classroom assistant or external specialist such as a speech therapist.
- This is a new process for everyone and like all changes may take some getting used to. There is an identified support worker in each Local authority for parents and carers. You will be able to get specialist advice and guidance on the process and your own situation.

If you have any general queries or would like to know how to get additional advice then speak to the SEN teacher in your school or call in to Virtual School (see contacts below).

Luciana Teuma

The Into HE programme

Merton Virtual School continues to participate in the "Into HE" programme organised by AimHigher London South. This programme brings together local universities and local authorities in order to provide a programme of taster days for looked after child and an annual conference for post 16 looked after children and care leavers.

This academic year, secondary students have had the opportunity to visit Kingston University and St George's University of London for bespoke taster days. The taster days are attended by other looked after children from local boroughs such as Croydon, Richmond and Kingston. The focus of the day is to introduce the university experience to the young people through fun activities. At St George's students went into a simulated ward and participated in various medical scenarios and used medical equipment such as a stethoscope; at Kingston they planned, filmed, acted in and edited a short video clip. In the upcoming visit to St Mary's there will be a 'hands on' Art Activity. The post 16 conference is being held at St George's this year and will focus on understanding the practical steps involved in applying to and being successful at university.

Please do get in touch if you have any queries about the Into HE programme.

Tracey Lewis



Tuition is still available

Are you a carer? Have you thought that your foster child needs some extra support to keep up with his/her classmates?

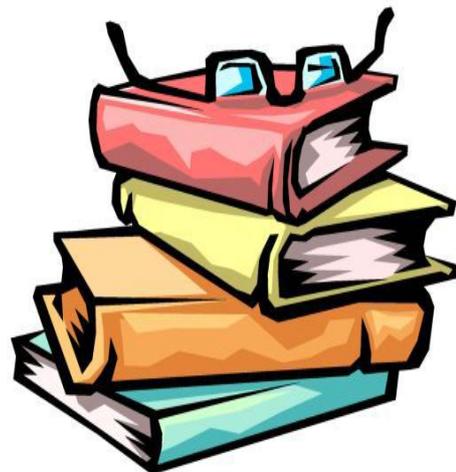
Are you a teacher? Do you have a looked after child in your class who seems to need an extra bit of specific help? Do you want some help to make this happen?

Are you a student? Do you wish you could get some extra help, quite quickly as you are falling behind?

If you have answered yes to any of these questions- The Virtual School can help.

We can help provide a tutor to come to the home and teach a student one-to-one in a very wide variety of subjects. We use agencies, well known to us and whose tutors we often get to know well.

You can contact one of our team if you feel you would like to have a tutor. You can do this at your next PEP or if you would like this support sooner, please call one of our listed numbers.



Pupil Premium

We are delighted that the Virtual School continues to receive pupil premium funding to be used to support the learning and achievements of Looked After Children of Statutory School Age and that we now also have Early Years Pupil Premium to be used for younger children. The terms of the grant allows for the Virtual School to pass additional funding to Local Authority Schools, Academies, Free School and Non-Maintained Special Schools (NMSS) to support pupils' Personal Education Plans. The Virtual School Merton distributes funding of £600 on a termly basis for each Looked After Child providing that we have all relevant information from schools and there is current plan in place. We are aware that some education colleagues feel that this may disadvantage children and young people who attend schools in the independent sector, but, for the moment, apart from some very specific requests, generally one off requests, the process for seeking additional funds is through the SEN Annual Review or discussion with Merton Access to Resources team.

Kathy Goodman
Head teacher

Back to School



A Special Message to Early Years Providers

The Early Years Pupil Premium of an addition 53p per hour is available to registered providers who have a Looked After Children aged 3 and 4 in their setting. It is important to remember that the pupil premium will be paid by the Local Authority who 'looks after' the child wherever that child attends a provision. So, if you have another borough child in your setting, you will need to contact the relevant borough to access additional funds. For Merton Looked After Children, funding will be dependent on there being an Early Years Education Plan in place.

Kathy Goodman
Head teacher



Permissions/ Signatures

There is no doubt that Pupil Premium gives schools the opportunity to provide additional support to meet the needs of its pupils. Indeed there are national awards for schools using this additional funding to have the best impact. At the Virtual School we see mainstream schools making more referrals for specialist assessment or offering more small group and individual input, for example: play therapy, emotional literacy support, speech and language groups. These interventions can be very beneficial for our children but can we remind schools that these should be incorporated into the child's personal education plan (PEP) and permissions need to be obtained by way of signatures. The signatures needed will be dependent on the arrangements by which the child or young person has become Looked After and who holds parental responsibility. This means that for children who have been accommodated under section 20 of the 1989 Care Act a parent's permission is needed, whereas for children on interim, emergency or full care orders, referrals can generally be signed by the child's social worker. Please contact the child's Advisory Teacher at the Virtual School if clarity or assistance is needed.

Kathy Goodman
Head teacher

Advance Notice

The promotion of emotional well-being is an important consideration for all of us working with children and young people. Indeed, it is important for our students to reach their potential. For many years now, one of the more reliable, and quick, methods of assessing this have been via the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). It is a questionnaire that is completed by the parents/carers and teachers of children aged 4 to 16; and there is a self-report version for 11-16 year olds. Once completed, responses are scored to give a profile of a child's strengths and difficulties and can help in planning to meet identified needs. The questionnaire is revisited each year and hopefully will show increasing strengths and decreasing difficulties.

Our colleagues in social care have asked for the support of The Virtual School in helping to ensure that the views of the school are included in the screening and so we will be asking designated teachers to assist. The questionnaire can be completed in 5 minutes and will need to be undertaken by the teacher who knows the child best. We are sure that schools will find results from this element of the screening interesting in itself but, given the importance of school in a child's life, its contribution to the child's overall care plan will be invaluable.

Our plan is to align the request to complete the SDQ with the PEP Process. This means that the completed questionnaire can be available for the social worker at the initial PEP meeting. More information will be available at the next LAC Designated Teacher meeting

Kathy Goodman
Head teacher



London Fostering Achievement training day

Across London there have been training events for foster carers, school staff and social workers that seek to promote the education of Looked After Children; these have been by the Mayor of London's office. Merton's event was held in March at the Chaucer Centre. It was a good opportunity to get foster carers, school teachers, social workers and the Virtual School together to discuss current issues. As ever it revealed everybody's passion to support the education of young people and their high aspirations for them.

Tracey Lewis

Advance notice

The London Borough of Merton is soon to be changing the Information Management system it uses to record work done and produce and store documents. This means that, although the same information will be included, the Personal Education Plan will look a little different once the system 'goes live'.

Results 2015

This Autumn lots of our young people have been starting new courses at colleges and universities all over London and further afield. Summer can be a nervous time for some who are waiting to get the results they need to get on the next level course at college or move onto a degree or a job role. Achieving qualifications and grades allows young people to show future employers a range of skills and abilities, whether it is to analyse complex information, repair a leak from a pipe or develop a marketing strategy.

This academic year, young people are starting degrees in the Arts, Sport and Business. Seven young people are moving into their second and third years of university. Last academic year six young people completed their university studies, achieving degrees and HNDs, three have taken up nursing positions and others are seeking roles in computing, healthcare and hospitality. Nearly all of these graduates got to university through either vocational qualifications such as BTECs in their areas of interest or Access qualifications gained as more mature students.

The majority of young people over sixteen are in further education taking vocational qualifications. Their interests cover a wide variety of fields including childcare, plumbing, electrical installation, hairdressing, beauty therapy and many more. Some will use these qualifications to pursue employment, others for university. Last academic year 14 young people completed entry level programmes, the majority of whom were studying English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Five students passed their level 1 qualifications; eight students passed level 2 qualifications and seven level 3 qualifications. Also last year two students completed apprenticeships. This year we have over 80 students in further education and apprenticeships. The Virtual School will continue to support them. Please do not hesitate to contact me for further information.

Tracey Lewis – 16 plus advisory teacher

Tracking

Just when we were feeling pleased that our system for tracking pupil attainment and progress was working well, everything started to change. Schools no longer have to use National Curriculum levels. Each school is now free to choose its own way to record and report on how well each child is performing.

There are various commercially produced systems and products available for schools to use and some schools have been working to produce their own systems. This means that we are likely to see a range of letters and numbers describing the standards reached by our children and young people and that these will mean different things according to the school's system. In future, it will be important to ask for clarification of any coding used.

Meanwhile, for all our pupils, tracking is now reduced to two questions "Is my child reaching national expectation?" and "Is my child making progress?" The new Personal Education Planning document has been amended accordingly.

Kathy Goodman Head teacher



excellence awards

Merton Council's Excellence Awards 2015

We are delighted that Governing Body of The Virtual School for Looked After Children and Care Leavers were winners of The Children, Schools and Families Team of the Year Award. The award was present by the Mayor, Councillor David Chung, The Leader of the Council, Councillor Stephen Alambritis, and The Chief Executive, Ged Curran. The citation in the programme says,

“This virtual team brings together colleagues from education and social care in a common purpose to achieve the very best outcomes for our Looked After Children and Care Leavers. Making the most of difference for each individual child is the main motivator for the Virtual School staff and their governing Body. Staff continually go the extra mile for individual young people, sometimes liaising with schools outside Merton to ensure our young people get the best support possible. They are making a big difference to the council's children.”

It is always pleasing to know that our efforts are appreciated and although the glass trophy now has pride of place in the Virtual School, our biggest reward is knowing that we are helping to provide our children and young people with the opportunity to achieve the best educational outcomes and improve their life chances. It was a small group of us who were presented with the trophy but we accepted it on behalf of all our colleagues working to secure the future success of our students.



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