

Virtual School Newsletter

Welcome to the Summer 2016 edition of the Virtual School Newsletter.

There are only weeks now before the end of another academic year, another busy year for The Virtual School in which I have delighted to welcome two new staff.

When I first became Virtual School Head I spent much of my time explaining the role. Since 2014 and the statutory requirement for each local authority to have one, the need to explain has reduced but the need to ensure our students are given the best opportunity to succeed remains.

There are studies which show that many children and young people believe that being successful is about being 'clever' or 'bright' or 'down to luck'. For many, who don't recognise their talents, success is something they may not believe they can achieve. As for luck, there is something to be said for being in the right place at the right time, but perhaps even this is something that can be planned for.

The Olympics will soon be upon us. Sporting events are a wonderful example of how talent needs to be found, nurtured but most of all, worked on - day in, day out, year after year in order to succeed. For our young people to succeed in school, college or university they need to know that it is their efforts that will bring the reward, and, just like running a marathon, it is the encouragement along the way that can make all the difference to staying the course.

Hopefully, this newsletter will reach all those who help our students understand that luck is not something to be relied upon but help them to find their particular talent, encourage them to develop a belief that they can achieve, and support them in establishing good working habits that will see success build upon success.

With my thanks and best wishes to all who help our students be the best they can be.

Kathy Goodman
Virtual School Head Teacher

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Hello from me.....

Hi, my name is s Jodie and I am a fairly new member of the team. I have lived in Merton my whole life, and have found it really interesting working for the local council.

Since joining The Virtual School in November, I have had a great insight into what we achieve and how much, each and every one in the team really cares about our students. I have had a warm welcome from everyone. I've already done so much, including attending an Excel training course with Sam, learning numerous new computer systems, helping in a Foster Carer training session with Tracey and Angela and I have also attended a CSF staff forum at the Chaucer centre which gave me a better understanding on how all the teams work together.

As part of my induction training organised by Sam, I attended a Primary school PEP with Angela. I found the PEP really interesting and quite thought provoking to learn how some of the students go on such a journey throughout their time in care. It really helped me realise what goes on at the PEP meetings and understand more about the role of the Advisory Teachers and the processes involved to try and ensure the best possible outcome for every child in care.

It was extremely insightful to see and hear the different views from the people that were involved in helping the young person succeed in education; it really does take everyone from Social Workers, to Foster Carers, Advisory Teacher's, Schools and birth parents working together and challenges being made to help the young person accelerate and thrive in their environment.

One of the highlights of my time here so far, has been helping Rosa with the Room 13 art exhibition. It was really warm and inspiring how much effort and care had been put into helping these young people have a creative outlet and how wonderful all of the artwork was.

A massive thank you to everyone involved and I can't wait to help with the next one.

I now feel completely settled into my admin role now and although I'm still learning and having the odd hiccup, I feel part of the team and look forward to the future within the team and working in Merton.



Challenging our young people

How does the thought of learning to rock climb in the real environment and doing an outdoor adventure residential trip in the summer appeal to you?



This and other opportunities are part of the National Citizen Service which is available to young people 15-17 to have opportunities to try new things and excel.

Running during half term and the summer, the programme involves:

- A short adventure away from home
- Developing new skills and meeting new people
- Team-building activities
- A unique experience to come up with your own project

After completing the programme participants get a certificate signed by the Prime Minister.

We have had several young people on this scheme in the past and also currently this year.

How to Apply

Young people can apply online or request an application form.

To apply online you'll need to provide your personal details such as email address and phone number. Once you have a registered your email address you can complete the rest later but we recommend completing the application as soon as possible to avoid disappointment.

To request a paper application email contact@ncsthechallenge.org or call 020 3542 2400

Extra support is available or young people who think they might need help to complete the challenge. This can be available through an additional scheme called the Personal coach scheme. The range of support is varied and personalised. You can speak directly to our area Outreach worker.

Art Exhibition

In April, the Civic Centre library became an art gallery for the afternoon to enjoy an exhibition of art work produced by our children and foster carers. The work was created in collaboration with the two resident artists, Louise and David in Room 13 at Aragon school. The sessions were held once a month over the last year.

Some amazing art pieces were on show, from individual clay faces and mosaics, to drawings of self-portraits in charcoal and batik designs on cloth. There were drawings and paintings of The World in Space and a colourful abstract canvas that showcased the group's collaborative skills!

The exhibition was well attended by Civic Centre employees and dignitaries, including the Mayor. People there were also invited to try out some of their drawing skills, with the artists giving them tips on mark making and shading.

Much of the artwork is on display on the 10th floor of the Civic building , with the larger canvas now in the office of the Director of Children, Schools and Families, to be admired by those working on that floor and for anyone visiting!

Rosa Ashton
Advisory Teacher



Letterbox Club Purple

Merton Virtual School is participating again this year in **The Letterbox Club**, a programme which aims to provide enjoyable educational support for looked after children across the UK and which is managed by BookTrust in partnership with the University of Leicester.

We are excited to let you know that Merton has been chosen to take part in a NEW project to trial **Letterbox Club Purple**, for looked after children aged 3-5.

As a result, from May 2016 a number of Merton looked after children will receive a special Purple parcel once every month for six months. The parcels are theirs to own and keep, and contents include:

- A range of **carefully selected books**
- Some simple **counting and sharing games**
- **Stationery items**, for writing and drawing

The child and their Carer's feedback are really important to enable the BookTrust to understand what they enjoyed about the parcels and what could be done to make these parcels even better. We look forward to working with the BookTrust and to getting your feedback about this fantastic project.

Angela Werney
Primary Advisory Teacher



Foster Carer Education Training dates Autumn Term 2016

Merton Early Years Team are running a number of courses for Foster Carers in the Autumn 2016. These courses are open to all carers who currently look after Merton Looked after children.

Supporting children with SEN Trainer – Kelly Salvador.

Thursday 29th September 9.45am - 1.00pm

This course aims to raise foster carers awareness of how to support children with SEN. It will identify the referral routes that they can follow if they have concerns about a child's development and give them practical examples of the support they can provide within the home for the child.

It will also help them to understand the support available to children if they attend a nursery or a school and to be aware of the roles that other professionals play.

Supporting children's learning outside (babies to 5 year olds) Trainer – Sharon Andrew

Tuesday 1st November 9.45am to 12.45/1.00

This course aims to raise the foster carers' awareness of the value of outdoor play and will give advice around practical (and free) activities to undertake with children when they are out and about. It will help carers to understand how the outside environment and outside activities can support children's all round development and promote the formation of children having a healthy lifestyle.

For further details please contact Steve Butcher

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Fostering Team and MSCB
020 8545 4220

steve.butcher@merton.gov.uk

EET Advisor - Bobby Ali

Since the last newsletter a new role has been created with the Virtual School. The role of EET advisor is focused on the education, employment and training of our post 16 young people. Bobby started in November but was happily already familiar with Merton from his time in the Transforming Families team.

Bobby works closely with the 14+ team to link up with their young people. He engages with young people mainly on an individual basis so that he can offer bespoke support. This can include support with CV writing and the completion of application forms as well interview skills. Please get in touch with the Virtual School if you have any queries.

Polka Theatre

In February a group of children and their foster carers went to see the enchanting performance of Beauty and the Beast at the Polka Theatre.

It was an excellent production of a children's favourite and the magic was in abundance. In the play we met two sisters; feisty Cassandra and timid Belle. When their father was threatened by a fearsome Beast, it was Belle who came to the rescue. We followed her brave adventure to the mysterious mansion where the Beast lived and there she discovered the true meaning of beauty.

As the story unfolded, Belle and the Beast formed a friendship and bond and she was able to ultimately free him from a beastly curse.

The show was an enchanting rendition of a children's classic and the children and grown-ups were equally exhilarated by the adventure, music, magic and mystery!



Life Without Levels

It's now nearly thirty years since The National Curriculum was introduced in England. This means that for many teachers, social workers and carers the idea of a curriculum organised into Key Stages and levels is very familiar. We know for example that Level 2 is the national expectation for 7 year olds, level 4 for 11 year olds and level 6 for 14 year old.

Changes to assessment and reporting arrangements means that schools are now free to choose how to report attainment and progress and there are a range of systems being used. The idea is to focus on the individual child and make sure that he or she is working to the best of their ability, whatever that ability may be. Rather than looking at national curriculum levels achieved, the focus is whether the child is working at Age Related Expectation and whether progress is being made.

As our children attend many different schools, each with their own arrangements for tracking progress these changes have presented Virtual Schools with some significant challenges. We are seeing a variety of numbers and letters being used to describe attainment and progress and are still working our way through how to make sure we have the data we need to ensure aspirations and support are in place to help our children and young people achieve their best.

Meanwhile, as part of our Personal Education Planning process we are asking three important questions: "Is the child or young person working at age expected levels?" "What is the target for the end of the next key stage?" "Is the child or young person on track to achieve that target?" The last question allows for a discussion for how we can all work together to ensure that our pupils achieve success.

Graduation Ceremony

Earlier this academic year I had the privilege to attend the graduation ceremony for one of our care leavers; it was a lovely day. This young man came to the UK several years ago and has accomplished much in those years. He has learnt another language and adapted to a new education system. After several years of study in further education, he gained a place at university and satisfied a long held ambition. He is now a graduate starting on his career. Over the years the Virtual School has supported, advised and encouraged this care leaver and it was an honour to be invited to his graduation.

Tracey Lewis
Advisory Teacher

National Association of Virtual School Heads: "Looking after Learning"

The National Association of Virtual School Heads was formally launched in March by Edward Timpson at the annual conference for Virtual School Heads.

The National Association will work to improve educational outcomes for looked after children by working with partners and commissioning research to ensure that the educational needs of looked after children are better understood. This will ensure we have the information we need to guide us in providing the best support for children in care and ensure the advice we give to our colleagues in schools and children's services is underpinned by sound evidence.

Working together for looked after children and care leavers

In spring 2015 Croydon Virtual School took the lead in bringing together a meeting of representatives of from Virtual Schools and Further Education Colleges in South London and North Surrey to better support our looked after children and care leavers. Merton Virtual School has been working alongside colleges since 2008 but was keen to participate in a more formal network.

This group has allowed members to improve their understanding of the barriers to education for young people who are or were in care. We have developed protocols on how we share information so Colleges and Virtual Schools can work more closely to meet an individual student's needs. There are currently 11 Virtual School members and 11 further education college members. Merton Virtual School is the current chair of the network.

Getting involved to make Merton, London's Best Council

The London Borough of Merton is working toward becoming London's Best Council and we have all received a "Help us be the best" postcard on which we can write one small change we as individuals can make to help Merton on its journey to becoming the capital's best council in five years time. Of course being the best council is about providing the best services.

It was my pleasure recently to have been asked to talk with the Association of Merton Foster Carers, to tell them about our aims and aspirations for our young people and to answer their questions. I think most carers were pleased to hear how successful many of our students are but in a game of 'higher or lower' were surprised how vulnerable Looked After Children are to exclusion, poor outcomes at GCSE and not going on to education, training and employment after statutory school age.

This meeting was a real opportunity to share the priorities of The Virtual School to ensure we provide for, and achieve the best possible outcomes for our children and young people and the question and answer session was over all too quickly.

Of course many of our Looked After Children are cared for by other agencies whom we are less likely to meet on a regular basis, but too all, the message is the same: If you have any concerns that your child's school is not able to help you with, or any suggestions how we might be able to improve our service please don't wait for the next PEP, contact your Advisory Teacher at The Virtual School.



Attendance at school

Since April we have been using a commissioned service, Contact Group, Looked After Call, to monitor our students' attendance. The new system allows us to see who is in their school in 'real time'. In the autumn we will be extending this monitoring to include our 16 and 17 year old students.

We are aware of the recent court judgement around taking family holidays during term time, but the London Borough of Merton is not in agreement with children and young people missing school for any avoidable reason.

Attendance at 95% and above is our expectation, and we will continue to acknowledge significant improvements and excellent attendance, essential not only to make progress in learning, but as a foundation for good habits in adult life.

Nimbl

This year we are piloting a new way to support learning. We are asking a group of students across all age phases to try out a 'learning app'. The app can be run on a computer, a tablet or even a Smart phone. We hope that our young people will find the videos, quizzes and games a fun way to learn and look forward to their feedback.



Awards and Rewards

In the last newsletter we were pleased to report that The Governing Body/Steering Group of The Virtual School was nominated for a Merton Excellence Award. We were delighted that the work of this group, made up of senior leaders from different services within Children Schools and Families were judged to be the overall winners.

In addition, Tracey Lewis was invited for a 'celebration tea' with The Director in recognition of her nomination for an individual reward.

Of course, it is an honour for our work to be recognised in this way, but our biggest reward is seeing our young people become confident and independent young adults.



Supporting Transitions

The end of the school year is approaching fast. For most of our students this will mean a time for change in teachers and assistants. Some students will be getting ready for a change of school, while others will be preparing to leave school and take up their post 16 college places.

Ending and beginnings, although exciting, can also cause considerable anxiety and be particularly challenging for Looked After Children. Transitions need to be thought about and supported carefully. Time needs to be given to allow each of our students to become familiar with the new situation by introducing them gradually supporting each small step with explanations and reassurance. Many will still feel the loss of attachment to a teacher or school, but the warmer the welcome and the greater the understanding of their needs, the more they will gain in their skills and confidence to face changes that are a necessary part of life.

Date for the diary

Tuesday 20th September 2016 late afternoon, early evening.

Later this year The Virtual School will join with the Children in Care Council to host a celebration event.

We are hoping that this will give the children an opportunity to share their successes with their carers, teachers and social worker, it will hopefully be a really lovely evening and it will be a great recognition of all of the wonderful achievements our young people have done throughout the year.

The details are yet to be agreed but the intention is to hold an awards ceremony in The Council Chamber with refreshments and a trip to the top of The Civic Centre building to look across at the London skyline.

Look out for your invitation in the post – more details to follow!



Cllr Maxi Martin

Alongside all colleagues in Children's Social Care, The Virtual School was saddened by the illness and loss of Cllr Maxi Martin. Maxi always showed great interest in our work and the achievements of the children always supported our special events. She was truly our 'critical friend' and will be much missed.

Kathy Goodman
Head Teacher



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