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WM Enterprise Consultants
2nd Floor
Orbital House
85-87 Croydon Road
Caterham, Surrey
CR3 6PD

T: 01883 332579

F: 01883 337112

E: mail@wm-enterprise.co.uk

W: www.wm-enterprise.co.uk



**Neighbourhood Management
in Springbourne & Boscombe West**

EVALUATION OF NURTURE PROJECT

A REPORT BY: WM ENTERPRISE CONSULTANTS

1. EVALUATION OF NURTURE GROUP

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings from the evaluation of the Nurture Project (also known as "Spangles") at St. Clement's and St. John's Infant School in Springbourne. WM Enterprise Consultants conducted the evaluation during March 2004.

The purpose of the evaluation has been to assess the success of the scheme to date in achieving its aims and objectives, to identify the need for continued assistance to the project, and to assess the extent to which further NM funds may be required to support the project.

The evaluation process has included a review of project monitoring information, interviews with the Headteacher (Valerie Powis) and Nurture Group teacher (Lindsey Stephenson), and analysis of feedback forms completed by parents of children that have attended the Nurture Group.

1.2 PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Nurture project seeks to assist children between the ages of 4 and 6, specifically targeting children with particular needs in respect of social, emotional or behavioural difficulties (as distinct from children with special needs in terms of learning difficulties). Support and learning activities are provided in small group sessions to children selected for the project. Children attend regular classes in the mornings and attend the Nurture group four afternoons a week. The group allows the children 'time-out' from regular classes while also working with them to develop social skills, interpersonal skills, conversational skills, building self-esteem etc.

The Nurture group provides flexible learning activities that are responsive to the needs of individual children and the problems they may face. The class is facilitated by a teacher and two teaching assistants in a class of a maximum of 10 pupils – providing a much higher pupil-teacher ratio than in normal classes. A range of activities are provided including special puzzles to explore emotions and feelings which are then related to real life situations, a range of 1-2-1 activities (e.g. cooking, arts and crafts), and the group always enjoys a snack time.

The team at the school has established a robust mechanism for selecting children to participate in the group. All pupils first attending the school are assessed using the Goodmans Strengths and Weaknesses Questionnaire to identify children who are having problems. On the basis of this questionnaire and the opinions of school teachers a shortlist is drawn up and parental permission sought. Children entering the Nurture Group are further assessed using the Boxall Profile, the recognised standard for assessments of this type. This test is also repeated later in the year to allow an assessment of change to be made for each pupil.

Whilst all children are assessed during their Reception time (usually September), children do not enter the Nurture Group until they are in full-time attendance (normally January or Easter), and then normally continue with the group throughout Year 1. On average pupils stay for 4 – 5 terms in the group before being re-integrated to regular classes, usually in Year 2.

Currently the maximum size of the group is 10 pupils, though the management team are flexible if a particular need arises. This is considered to be the optimum size for the group given the facilities available and to ensure a high level of interaction with the pupils with the staff resources available.

The project was initiated in January 2002, fully funded by the school itself. A project Steering Group was established by the school, including representatives from the school, governors and parents. The Steering Group undertook much of the preparatory investigation into the scheme, including visits to other projects.

Following the success of the first year of the scheme, the school successfully applied for funding from the Children's Fund and the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder to continue the scheme for a further year. Funding of £4,800 from the Children's Fund and £15,450 from NM was secured for the project for the 2003/04 financial year.

1.3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The overall aim of the project is to assist children to learn, through activities appropriate to the needs of the child. Thus, the key objectives of the project are to raise self-esteem, build confidence, improve social skills, improve communication skills, improve behaviour and develop interpersonal skills of the children attending the group. Obviously each child has different needs so the focus will differ for each child.

It is worthwhile noting that it is **not** the primary aim of the project to improve educational attainment of the pupils involved (though as noted below, this is sometimes a knock-on effect of the project).

The nature of the project is such that it is difficult to set clear, quantifiable targets as the key outcomes tend to be 'softer' ones that are hard to measure e.g. improved self-esteem, improved behaviour etc. However, the management team did set a number of targets in this respect:

- Reduced incidents of bad behaviour in the classroom/playground;
- Increased willingness of pupils to engage in social activities.

The project also seeks to achieve a number of Children's Fund objectives:

- To improve opportunities in, and access to, the school curriculum for children in early years;
- To re-integrate all children into other classes;
- To lessen or eliminate the effect of a dysfunctional family on a child's ability to access the curriculum and function within the wider school community;
- Support and enable the participation of parents, carers and families.

1.4 ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT AND ACHIEVEMENTS

A total of around 35 pupils have benefited from the project since its inception. The evidence relating to the extent to which the project has achieved its objectives is largely anecdotal and given the focus on individual pupil needs, it is difficult to make an overall assessment of the project. However, a number of changes have been observed in relation to the targets that were set:

- Reduced incidents of bad behaviour in the classroom/playground – the management and staff team at the school have observed an improvement in this regard through observing pupil behaviour and their reactions to situations that arise e.g. the way pupils react to situations has been seen to change as a result of the Nurture group
- Increased willingness of pupils to engage in social activities. Again there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that this has been achieved for individual pupils, often through improved self-esteem and self-confidence in group situations.

The project has also achieved its Children's Fund objectives. The presence of the group clearly serves to improve opportunities and access to the school curriculum for pupils in the target age range, and the project successfully re-integrates pupils into the mainstream curriculum, usually in Year 2. The project has made numerous attempts to facilitate parent involvement but has had some difficulty in engaging with some parents. The management team have identified this as a priority for action in the next year.

The evidence supplied by parents also points to the success of the project. Parents have noted improvements in the concentration of their children and have noticed the positive effects that the small group environment has brought about for their children. Parents have also noted improvements in their child's communication skills, inter-personal skills, and confidence.

In some cases, the project has also resulted in improved attainment of pupils with some achieving Level 2, a higher level than would have been expected in the absence of the Nurture project.

In the longer term, the use of the Boxall profile to monitor change in pupil performance/behaviour will provide a more quantifiable measure of the extent to which the project has been successful in addressing the needs of individual pupils. The school should be encouraged to monitor and record changes in order that future evaluation studies can access this information and make an assessment of the changes that the project has brought about for pupils that have attended the group.

The project has also generated other positive effects beyond those achieved for pupils themselves. The project has successfully raised awareness of the problems faced by some pupils (and how to deal with them) throughout the school staff team, and has also served to raise the skills of all staff (for example, through the use of the assessment tools).

The Nurture project at St. Clement's and St. John's Infant School was one of the first such schemes to have developed in Bournemouth, and the team at the school are often called upon to share their experience and expertise with others looking to establish similar schemes. This is a reflection of the success of the scheme and the skills and knowledge accumulated by staff at the school in how to implement and deliver a successful project that benefits the target group of pupils.

The management team have clearly established (often through trial and error) excellent working practices and procedures, right through from the initial assessment of children's needs to the activities provided, and the re-integration of children into the mainstream school curriculum. The team have also learned to be more focussed in their activities and now successfully prioritise the needs of pupils to ensure a focussed and manageable programme of action.

One of the key strengths of the project is the commitment and ability of the management and staff team that deliver the project:

- The project has enabled a better understanding of the school population and allowed the team to respond to needs of pupils. The management team are clear on what they can achieve are not over-ambitious in what they are trying to achieve i.e. they do not try to be all things to all people, but prioritise need and act accordingly. This is a key factor behind the success of the project to date;
- The management team is reflective and willing to try new ideas. The team readily accept that the project is a learning process for them as well as the pupils and readily make changes where certain activities are considered to have been less effective

No fundamental weaknesses were observed within the project itself, though the staff team are conscious of the need to further improve and develop relationships with parents. To this end the team are planning to more pro-actively involve parents, though such activities are largely dependent on suitable funding being obtained.

The management team submit quarterly monitoring forms to the NM team, in accordance with the conditions attached to Year 1 funding of the project. These are appropriate to the scheme and no major changes are recommended to the current systems in place. It would be helpful if the team could also record the number of pupils attending the group during each term/year of the project.

We recommend that, should the NM continue to fund the project, a requirement be included to provide an analysis of measured changes in pupil performance (using the Boxall methodology) at the year end to aid the assessment of the impact of the project. Obviously, it will be important to ensure the confidentiality of pupil records, but it should be possible for anonymous copies of records to be provided.

1.5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This is a well-designed project that benefited immensely from the extensive investigative and preparatory work undertaken by the Steering Group, and has been successfully delivered by a competent and committed team of staff.

The St. Clement's and St. John's scheme is providing good value for money. At total cost of £20,000 per annum, or an equivalent of £2,000 per place available, the scheme offers better value for money than other schemes. A 1998 study¹ found that the average cost per pupil of similar schemes was around £2,800. However, direct comparisons are difficult to make as the Springbourne scheme operates on half-days rather than full day programmes common in other schemes. However, the mix of Nurture and regular schooling will aid the re-integration of pupils into mainstream schooling that is a key feature of the scheme.

The school is committed to continuing the project given the benefits it has observed for the children that have attended the Group. The school has already received confirmation that the Children's Fund will provide funding of £4,800 p.a. for the next two years to support the project, and the NM Programme has committed £12,250 for the 2004/05 year subject to successful evaluation of the project. This leaves a funding shortfall of around £3,200 to fully support the project. Whilst the school have some resources available to fund the project it is considered that the quality of the project would suffer if there were a significant funding shortfall e.g. the loss of teaching assistant functions would have to be considered, which would have a knock-on effect on the impact that the Group is able to have on the children involved.

The project clearly fits within the remit and objectives of the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder, as a project aimed at improving the lives and opportunities available to the people of Springbourne. Its activities would fall under the Education and Health theme of the Pathfinder programme, and clearly fits within the increased emphasis placed on this theme in the Delivery Plan for 2004/05. Whilst the project targets primary school children rather than secondary school, the long-term benefits of the project will eventually feed through to this level.

Continued leverage funding is justified to ensure the continuation of this successful and innovative project, that is seeking to address some of the underlying causes of deprivation in the Springbourne area. With intervention taking place at an early age in the children's lives, it is the view of the evaluator that the long-term impacts in terms of the quality of life of the children who benefit and their future educational attainment will be enhanced by the project. The project is also a good example of a successful NM project and receives significant local and national attention, which serves to improve the awareness and image of the NM scheme overall.

¹ Boyd and Arnold, *The Promotion and Evaluation of Nurture Groups*, University of Cambridge School of Education (1998)

Whilst the project would undoubtedly benefit from NM funding to address the current shortfall, the Board should be mindful of its mainstreaming responsibilities and encourage the school to plan to sustain the group without NM funding in future years. The staff team at the school are committed to the continuation of the project and have indicated that it will continue in the absence of additional NM support, though it is the view of the evaluator that if no additional NM funding were provided during 2004/05 the quality and effectiveness of the project would suffer.

It is recommended that the NM Board fulfil their commitment to provide core funding of £12,250 to the Nurture project for the coming year, and also to fund an additional £3,200 to address the current funding shortfall, with a view to reducing or withdrawing funding in future years to encourage mainstreaming of the project. The school team should be encouraged (and if necessary, assisted) to prepare a succession strategy for the project. The school should also be asked to consider the specific recommendations regarding the monitoring of the project and pupil outcomes as detailed above.