**Educational Success for Children in Alternative Care**

The importance of education is identified in articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

**article 28** (right to education)  
Every child has the right to an education. Primary education must be free and different forms of secondary education must be available to every child. Discipline in schools must respect children’s dignity and their rights. Richer countries must help poorer countries achieve this.

**article 29** (goals of education) Education must develop every child’s personality, talents and abilities to the full. It must encourage the child’s respect for human rights, as well as respect for their parents, their own and other cultures, and the environment.

and in guidelines 46, 85 and 95 of the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, adopted by the General Assembly in 2009:

46. Specific training should be provided to teachers and others working with children in order to help them to identify situations of abuse, neglect, exploitation or risk of abandonment and to refer such situations to competent bodies.

85. Children should have access to formal, non-formal and vocational education in accordance with their rights, to the maximum extent possible in educational facilities in the local community.

95. States, agencies and facilities, schools and other community services should take appropriate measures to ensure that children in alternative care are not stigmatized during or after their placement. This should include efforts to minimize the identification of children as being looked after in an alternative care setting.

Improving educational outcomes for children in alternative care can:

* Ensure each individual can thrive
* Break the cycle of care
* Give greater opportunity for the care experienced to gain positions of responsibility in civil society, government, business and all communities thereby bringing greater understanding to what needs to be done

Children and young people who experience care require particular consideration of their needs by all those around them and this applies equally to their educational needs. Family disruption, trauma and attachment are only some of the significant factors which need to be taken into account. Since 2014, local authorities in England have been required to appoint a person “for the purpose of discharging the local authority’s duty to promote the educational achievement of its looked-after children, wherever they live or are educated.” This person is known as the Virtual School Head or Virtual School Headteacher. Virtual Schools are not online schools. Children still attend “real” schools but all the children in the care of the local authority are cared for, monitored and supported by the Virtual School Head and Virtual School Team in the same way as the headteacher and school staff support the pupils in the schools.

Virtual Schools have been so effective and respected in improving educational opportunity and life chances for children in alternative care that the government, through the Department for Education, has extended the Virtual School Head responsibility, from September 2021, to include all children with a social worker. These “children in need” are not in alternative care but their needs are similar.

A compact history of Virtual Schools in England

* Early 2000s: various pieces of research, including that done by the Institute of Education and the Social Exclusion unit, provide evidence that significant numbers of children who had experienced care were not achieving the educational outcomes which would have been expected. Local authorities, responsible for those children, use various strategies to support them, often by means of a dedicated Looked After Children Education Support (LACES) team.
* 2002 to 2005: the idea of monitoring all the children in the care of a local authority in the same way as a good school monitors the progress of the children attending the school is discussed by many professionals. The terms “virtual headteacher” and “virtual school” are coined to describe this idea.
* 2005: some fledgling Virtual Schools are started, extending the work of LACES teams in a handful of local authorities.
* 2007-2009: The Department for Children, Schools and Families runs a pilot scheme in 11 local authorities to explore the potential of the Virtual School Head (VSH) for Looked After Children. Evaluation published by the School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol, August 2009.
* 2008: The Children and Young Persons Act requires schools to have a Designated Teacher for Looked After Children. The Designated Teacher should be senior enough to lead the school’s approach to the education of children in care.
* 2010: The Department for Education convenes a National Steering Group of Virtual School Heads from local authorities which have established virtual schools. The steering group has representatives from each of the nine English regions.
* 2014: The Children and Families Act requires local authorities in England to appoint at least one person (the Virtual School Head) for the purpose of discharging the local authority’s duty to promote the educational achievement of its looked after children. The government assigns part of the Pupil Premium Grant (a nationwide grant assigned to schools to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children) to be managed by the Virtual School Head for each authority.
* 2014: The National College for School Leadership (now the National College for Teaching and Leadership) commissions support from VSHs through the DfE to rewrite training materials for school leaders and school governors reflecting the statutory changes regarding the promotion of good educational outcomes for looked after children.
* 2016: The National Association of Virtual School Heads is formally established (it existed informally beforehand), ensuring that the VSH for each local authority is a member.
* 2018: Statutory instrument makes VSH have responsibilities regarding children who have left care.
* 2020: The Covid-19 pandemic changes almost everything and provides new understanding of how children can succeed educationally.
* 2021: VSHs assume wider responsibility for all children with a social worker.

Virtual Schools are now being introduced in Scotland and consideration of the model is under way in Wales. For many countries it will not necessarily be the Virtual School model that is relevant but rather what Virtual Schools do in bringing together children, families, carers, social workers, teachers and all relevant agencies to improve, and in many instances substantially change, practices so that children and young people can flourish educationally.

The evidence for the effectiveness of good and appropriate practice can be found in publications from the [Rees Centre](http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/rees-centre/) at the University of Oxford, most notably:

* “Children in Need and Children in Care: Educational Attainment and Progress” 2020 (in partnership with the University of Bristol)

(Linked to the project above, funded by the [Nuffield Foundation](https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/), is a

[resource for young people](http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/EducationCareResource.pdf))

* “Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data” 2015
* Reports and findings on the progress of the [Alex Timpson Attachment and Trauma Awareness in Schools programme](http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/the-alex-timpson-attachment-and-trauma-programme-in-schools/).

Patrick Ward, the current chair of the [National Association of Virtual School Heads](https://navsh.org.uk/), is keen that the learning and progress made in improving educational outcomes for those who experience care is shared across the globe. Equally, those of us who have experienced the responsibility of being a Virtual School Head understand that we can learn much from our colleagues in other countries. The opportunities are immense. If you are interested in taking some first steps in exploring links, please make contact with me in the first instance. I am an Associate Member of the National Association of Virtual School Heads.

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