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Research into small school closures makes surprising findings

Oct 15, 2007 00:00 | By **Abbie Wightwick**

RESEARCH into the effects of the closure of small schools in Wales has been done for the first time, the Western Mail can reveal today.

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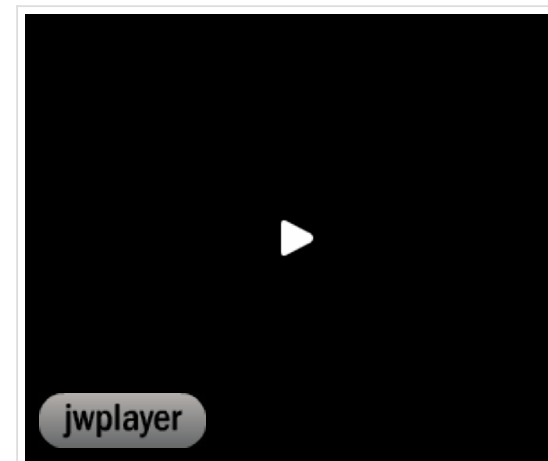


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RESEARCH into the effects of the closure of small schools in Wales has been done for the first time, the Western Mail can reveal today.

The nation has a long history of shutting schools but this study – which has made “controversial” findings – will be the first indication of how pupils’ education is affected when it is published next month.

It has also emerged that this ad hoc closure trend contrasts dramatically with



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Scotland, where the new Scottish National Party government has reversed closures agreed by the former Labour administration.

Last Thursday Scottish Education Minister Fiona Hyslop also wrote to all of Scotland's councils highlighting the importance of quality education rather than closing schools to save cash.

She stressed the importance of considering the wider impact on communities and of assessing the effects on pupils' education.

And in England the Government issued advice "against presumption of closure" in 1998. Ofsted reports have repeatedly outlined good results from small schools and some councils, including Durham, have a policy of supporting small schools.

In Wales, campaigners have consistently argued that closing schools, which happens mainly in rural areas, destroys village life. They say smaller classes deliver the personalised learning that politicians often advocate. And they believe closures are driven by cost, rather than improving education.

Results of the new £30,000 study, commissioned by the Institute of Welsh Affairs and funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, will be unveiled at a conference in Cardiff in November.

It is expected to conclude that shutting small schools can have benefits for pupils moved to larger schools with more facilities and children.

The research looked at evidence from six schools shut in Powys and Pembrokeshire over the last decade. Interviews were carried out with 48 people, including parents, governors, teachers and eight pupils. They were asked questions ranging from how closure had affected the Welsh language to what it meant for education.

IWA director John Osmond and the report's author, Professor David Reynolds from Exeter University, suggested many had found closures delivered positive outcomes.

Mr Osmond said, "On the whole people dislike change, but sometimes after having been through change they look at it in a different light.

"It's a question of what replaces what they had.

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“We are not advocating a particular course of action on one side or the other. We are just looking for evidence. We were surprised by the results.”

Professor Reynolds described the findings as “controversial” and questioned why the Welsh Assembly Government had not carried out its own study into one of today’s most pressing educational issues.

“We asked what were the advantages and disadvantages of reorganisation and what lessons are there to be learned?” he said.

“We collected performance data from Pembrokeshire, which looked at whether the closed schools did better than the new schools that pupils were sent to.

“We wanted to know – does education improve after closure or not?”

“It is extraordinary and ridiculous that the Welsh Assembly Government has not done research itself. We have to ask ourselves why this has not been done before?”

“This is the first time this research has been done, although small school closures have been a live issue for 20 to 30 years in Wales.

“There are lots of schools with 20, 30, 40 pupils in England and they are not closing.

“The important thing is that this research leads to fully-funded WAG research across Wales.

“It would cost six figures, but if you think of the potential benefits they would be huge and I don’t understand why it has not been done before.

“The findings of this research are sure to be controversial.”

Sarah Millington, whose son Stephen, seven, is a pupil at Howey Church in Wales School in Powys, which faces closure next August, said, “Classes are smaller so they get more individual time and attention.”

Mervyn Benford, national co-ordinator of the National Association for Small Schools, claimed there was evidence showing learning and behaviour was better in small schools.

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