News article

Nov 2021

Top marks for education start-up

A software platform built to help schools improve attendance and intervention management is to be rolled out across the UK following a successful trial.



A Star Attendance Solutions, founded in 2018 by former local authority attendance officer Jill Robson, has developed a pioneering online platform that helps schools manage pupil attendance in a more transparent, fair and robust way.

Built by Durham based business and IT consultancy Waterstons, the platform is the brainchild of director and founder Jill and - following a successful trial in 12 schools - is now receiving top marks across the board after being rolled out in schools across the North of England.

Jill said: "Having spent the best part of 22 years working as an attendance officer, I'd witnessed first-hand the impact continuous Government cuts were having on the education sector, especially in terms of early intervention attendance support.

"The cuts slashed budgets and meant local authorities were no longer able to continue to provide the additional support required and were forced to focus on undertaking their statutory duty. With schools still being responsible for day-to-day management of non-school attendance, the impact of losing the additional support from the local authority was clear for all to see.

"I knew there must be a better way for schools to manage attendance and intervention and so, at the age of 52, I decided to take voluntary redundancy and set up on my own to address the issue head on."

Initially, Jill aimed to work three days a week and provide attendance and intervention support to a few local schools, however it wasn't long until word of mouth spread, and more and more schools began approaching her for support.

Within just 12 months, Jill employed a team of three members of staff and was working with schools from South Tyneside to Teesside. But as demand grew, so did the workload and the team set about further streamlining the services they offered.

"They say necessity is the mother of invention and that was certainly the case with the A Star System," Jill added. "While the personal provision had helped massively reduce staff workloads and transform the way attendance and intervention was monitored, we soon realised it was very time consuming and we knew there must be another way.

"I decided to explore ways of improving the process and worked with Waterstons to devise a software platform to automate the entire process, eliminating any chance of human error while reducing overheads for schools, the majority of which had already seen their budgets slashed in recent years.

"This led to me being introduced to Sunderland City Council's Business Investment Team, Innovation SuperNetwork and Gateshead GX, all of whom supported me as I developed the system. Their ongoing support has been invaluable."

The platform is now being used by 38 schools across the North of England, with one North East secondary school in particular witnessing a 2% increase in attendance since introducing the system.

She added: "Our overall aim for A Star is to help schools more effectively monitor attendance, ensuring no child is forgotten and ensuring every child has the same opportunity.

"This will not only help young people get more from education but it will also help teachers identify issues impacting on attendance at an early stage whilst building bridges with families.

"The A Star System is the first and only intelligent monitoring solution that achieves this, offering a comprehensive solution to attendance monitoring, tracking, intervention, and reporting by managing every aspect of pupils' attendance, without the need to produce endless reports and we're delighted with how it has been received so far."

Rachel Donohue, Principal at Academy 360 in Sunderland, said: "A Star Attendance has been an absolutely fantastic resource. It has given us greater opportunity to work strategically with parents and students to improve attendance by focusing on the root of the issue.

"In the first month alone, we saw a 2% increase in attendance figures with Pupil Premium, SEND and Boys now at National Average. The impact has been transformational."

Councillor Graeme Miller, leader of Sunderland City Council, said: "Ensuring young people have a fair and equal opportunity to receive the best possible education is a key priority of ours as a council and we're delighted to have been able to support Jill and the team on their journey so far."