

WeInspire Evaluation Report:
September 2025 to July 2026

What is WeInspire?

WeInspire is WeMindTheGap's in-school wellbeing and belonging programme for secondary students with gaps in attendance and engagement. Funded by the Westminster Foundation, in 2025/26 it ran in three Chester schools: Queen's Park High School, The Bishops' Blue Coat High School and The Catholic High School, Chester.

Pastoral teams refer students in Years 7 to 11 who are facing low confidence, anxiety, friendship difficulties, falling attendance or difficult home lives. Each school hosts one cohort of 10 to 15 young people per term, meeting for a combination of a three-hour group session and one-to-one mentoring each week, for a period of 12 weeks. Sessions move through a framework that guides students to look inwards at their emotions and behaviours, outwards at their influences and identity, then forwards to their motivations and goals. Sessions incorporate aspirational guest speakers and a sequence of debate sessions, where students learn how to communicate effectively and respond to challenge respectfully.

Each element of the programme culminates in an end-of-programme showcase where students exhibit their voice and value in the school community. Mentors engage parents, carers and school staff throughout the programme and when the programme ends students join the WeInspire alumni; a weekly break time club that offers discreet mentoring for those who need it and sustains their peer friendships and connections.

Why WeInspire exists

WeInspire exists because the young people most likely to fall behind are often those who have stopped feeling they belong at school, for which the reasons are rarely academic. In England, disadvantaged students finish secondary school 19.1 months behind their peers at GCSE (Education Policy Institute, 2025), and students eligible for free school meals are more than two and a half times as likely to be persistently absent (Department for Education, 2025). In Wales, 51.3% of students eligible for free school meals were persistently absent in 2025/26, against 27.6% of all students (Welsh Government, 2026). Poor mental health has risen alongside this: 22.6% of 11 to 16 year olds in England had a probable mental disorder in 2023 (NHS England, 2023).

The young people referred to WeInspire reflect this picture. At least 31% were eligible for free school meals, above the English average of 26.5% (Department for Education, 2026). In some cohorts, over 50% were eligible for FMS support. School pastoral teams rarely have time for sustained one-to-one support. WeInspire gives them time with emotionally available adults, away from the pressure of getting answers right, to rebuild their confidence and develop a sense of belonging within their school community.



Westminster Foundation

Headline figures,
September 2025 to July 2026



108 young people referred across **9** cohorts in **3** Chester schools.

At least **31%** of participants were eligible for free school meals, rising to over half where schools completed referral forms in full.

92% (99 of 108) attended three or more sessions.

253 little wins recorded and shared with young people and their families.

98 three-hour group sessions delivered, with **862** attending in total for an average of **8.8** young people in the room each week.

80% of all students referred made progress in their social development, and 81% in their engagement within sessions.

Among those who attended three or more sessions, this rose to **87%** and **89%**.



92% of young people with a development score moved forward on the development scale, by an average of **3.1 points**.

WeInspire

Attendance and development

Engagement and development rise together. Students who attended nine or more sessions moved forward by an average of 3.7 points on the development scale, more than double the 1.5 points of those who attended three to five.

The same pattern is in evidence across the year. Spring cohorts ran for 9 to 10 weeks in a term affected by winter illness, and had both the lowest average sessions attended (7.4) and the lowest average development score (2.5), against 3.2 in autumn and 3.5 in summer. Little wins recorded were 82 in autumn, 100 in spring and 71 in summer.

What we learnt

The needs are shared, but every young person shows them differently

Across all three schools and all nine cohorts, the same themes recur: low confidence, struggles with mental health and difficulties at home. How those needs showed up varied enormously. Some young people were silent and withdrawn, sitting as if to make themselves smaller; others were loud and found it hard to regulate. Each cohort also took on its own personality, from playful to calm, one close group to two smaller ones. Understanding the young person behind the referral reason mattered more than the reason itself.

Age and stage change - the challenge

The Year 7s we met were often still trying to settle into secondary school, many with special educational needs (diagnosed and undiagnosed) such as ADHD, autism or dyslexia, and their focus was on making a friend. By Years 8 and 9, young people talked more about friction with family at home. Older students described more friction with school staff and, for some, a growing sense of being worn down by academic struggle. Several young people's developmental stage did not match their school year, which suggests stage matters more than age.



Time with a trusted adult matters more than any single activity

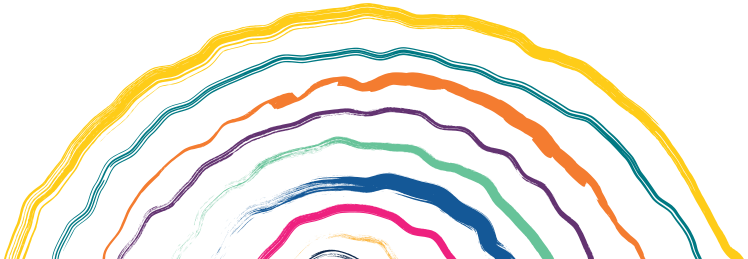
What young people seemed to value most wasn't any particular session. It was having an adult with the time to get to know them and listen. The activities matter, but the real work happens in the conversations around them. How a group is balanced makes a big difference to how much of that time each young person gets. In one Year 7 group, several young people needed regular breaks from the room, and by week five mentors still hadn't had a proper one-to-one chat with some of the quieter members. Behaviour that can look like attention-seeking usually turned out to be a need for connection.

The young people who need us most are often the quietest

The young people who come back to the break time club every week are usually the ones doing well. The ones we worry about most tend to go quiet, especially after a long holiday when they've got out of the habit of finding us. They rarely ask for help themselves, from us or from school staff, so it falls to the adults around them to be proactive and go and check in. Staying curious about who has stopped turning up has become just as important as supporting those who do.

Home life and school life cannot be separated

Many families we met had a difficult relationship with school, sometimes passed down from parents' own experience. Where we could build trust at home, it opened doors: for one mother whose relationship with school had broken down, we were able to facilitate a meeting with the attendance officer and said she wished she had done it sooner. Another family was referred to the Mental Health Support Team and went on to receive the professional support she needed. Many young people also live with instability, including house moves, family separation and moving to live with relatives, leading to some leaving school mid-programme. We know that whatever progress a student makes in the programme, can very easily be undone at home, leading our belief that a holistic approach is required for long term impact.



Case studies

Names have been replaced with initials.

A, Year 8

A has ADHD, an EHCP and one-to-one support in lessons, and significant separation anxiety that affects his journey to school. Staff warned he was unlikely to stay for his first session; he stayed for all three hours and the break time club. Over the following weeks he began sharing opinions in debates, even when they differed from his peers', and sat and joked with others in the group. On one difficult day, mentors pivoted the session to his strengths and took the group to the school's animal care room, where A led the visit and answered everyone's questions. Staff did not expect him to attend the student interview panel at the Chester Hub. He came, and surprised himself and exceeded the school's expectations.

N, Year 8

N was experiencing anxiety and low mood following her parents' separation, with declining attendance and difficult friendships. She was the youngest in a group of Year 9s and 10s and unsure whether to stay. She attended all 10 weeks. With consent to contact home, mentors shared positive updates with her mother, and both began to open up about the impact of family relationships on their mental health. Working with the school's safeguarding team, this led to a referral to the Mental Health Support Team and weekly counselling. N discovered she was spending over nine hours a day on her phone and made time for art and friends. She took a leading role in debates and now hopes to become a therapist or psychiatrist.

D, Year 10

D was referred with attendance of around 60%, anxiety and low mood, and a long wait for CAMHS. Her mother's relationship with school had broken down years before. D was very quiet at first, rarely making eye contact. During 'Looking Inwards' she grew confident talking about emotions and by 'Looking Outwards' was contributing to group discussions, something she never did in lessons, and became a role model for younger members. She attended 9 of 10 sessions. Mentors persisted with contacting home and eventually met D and her mother together, then arranged a meeting with the attendance officer. Her mother said she wished she had done it sooner, and D now receives additional support in school since completing WeInspire.

J, Key Stage 3

J was experiencing separation anxiety and low mood linked to complex family circumstances, and had not made a close friend since starting secondary school. He arrived late for his first session, hesitated to sit down and spoke only when asked a direct question. Week by week he arrived closer to the start time, began asking mentors questions and shared resources with others, and chose to stay for break time games. In a music workshop he co-wrote a piece about where he lives and agreed for it to be read aloud. At the Festival of Ideas, his work was presented to a room of peers, students from other schools and WeMindTheGap staff. Everyone clapped and cheered, and his smile said the rest.

Sources

Department for Education (2025), Pupil absence in schools in England, 2024/25

Department for Education (2026), Schools, pupils and their characteristics, 2025/26

Get Information About Schools, free school meals eligibility for Queen's Park High School, The Catholic High School, Chester and The Bishops' Blue Coat Church of England High School

Education Policy Institute (2025), Annual Report 2025: Disadvantage

NHS England (2023), Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023: wave 4 follow up

Welsh Government (2026), Attendance of pupils in maintained schools: 2 September 2025 to 24 July 2026 (provisional)

You can contact us at
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