Submission from Anna Sweet

I am responding to the call for evidence on the attainment gap by the committee.

I write as a parent of two children who started in the state sector in primary school and are now in the independent sector. I write also as a person entirely educated in the state sector, although married to somebody almost entirely educated in the private sector. I had wanted my children to be educated in the state sector at least for primary, but in the end we moved them after three years in the state sector.

When my daughter left after three years of primary in the state sector, she lacked confidence after the school had been unable to help her integrate socially. When arriving in the independent sector, she was considerably behind other children there in the areas of maths, information technology, music and sport. She also had a much narrower range of experience in terms of extra curricular activities. The independent school she attends assisted her not only to catch up but overtake, and she has been a scholarship girl the last two years. Teachers were more proactive with bullying issues so that she is now socially integrated. My son had a similar although less marked transition.

Most of my comments below relate to primary education as that is most of my current experience. The main differences that seem to be leading to improved attainment by my kids which I perceive are:

1. Far more highly motivated teachers in the independent school, willing not only to do core work imaginatively, but a lot of extra curricular and outside regular school hours work. While there is a small pay differential, my own view is that it is the feeling in the independent sector of being in control of their own school and destiny that really makes the difference. My impression in the state sector was that teachers felt dispirited and limited by the role of the education authority, feeling more like ‘big brother’ watching them than being supported, and having to cope with ever changing policy, paperwork, and demands.
2. Smaller class sizes.
3. A positive attitude in the school as a whole that it is a good thing to try everything and achieve. I contrast this with my own state experience of it not being cool to excel in anything; and to some extent my daughter’s experience at state school. There is a real drive to involve everybody in everything in the independent school so everybody gets a chance – for example in class assemblies right from age 5 every child has a line to be spoken into the microphone, and everybody who turns up for inter-school rugby matches gets a chance to play at least some of the match.
4. A broader curriculum. There are specialist teachers in music, sport, art and science at my kids’ school, who all do additional after school and weekend clubs too. There is plenty of research showing that learning a musical instrument boosts achievement in all areas.
5. Better after school cover incorporating other activities. For example, at their current school my kids have had opportunities to do woodcraft, drama, Code club, chess club, rugby, hockey, cricket, curling, squash, tennis, fencing, judo, football, thunderball, string orchestra, cross stitch, clay modelling, print making, knitting, cooking and many more – a good number of which are run by teachers.
So they can be in school learning in a positive way for a longer day (until 4.30 or so) which fits in more with parental working commitments so enabling the fees to be paid. I contrast this with the previous school where there were only two after school activities on offer (drama and sprights) for which there were few places, and an ‘afterschool club’ which in reality was a room with very little there and felt more like a ‘marking time’ centre until parents could pick up.

6. Availability of foreign language teaching from an early age, in French and Mandarin.

7. Better organisation by the teaching team. They have been able over a number of years to put in a teaching plan for each year that can be rolled forward (so if you have had a P5 child, you have a fair idea what your P3 child will be doing in 2 years – but so does the school which helps with planning and standards, but also managed innovation). Changing fashions in government thinking about education have affected them less and they have been able instead to integrate change they see as desirable.

8. Better facilities. It makes a difference when children have access to instruments, IT facilities, sports facilities, etc.

These approaches have assisted the achievement and attainment of my children at primary school. Most of them are not to do with “embedding in curriculum”, but are to do with funding, and less interference by central and local government.

I consider that there is a role for government in relation to education; for example there should be regulation, in a culture where equality is important, to ensure ‘faith’ schools do not teach against these principles and give an education in keeping with the general values of the country in which we live. But the role of government has to be limited, and to be based on respect and trust for teachers allowing them to get on with it themselves so they can spend most of their time teaching.

The full potential of independent schools to help attainment is not being realised, because not everybody can afford them. It would help more people to be able to go if there was a rebate of what would be spent by the state if their child was educated in the state sector – this could be put towards fees – or fees being able to come out of pre tax income. On the other hand, requiring independent schools to justify charitable status has been a good thing as more of their facilities have become available to pupils in the state sector too.

I don’t consider the school has to be responsible for reporting on wider achievements- it is just more paperwork for something that happens outside school. There is nothing wrong with parents and pupils having a role in bringing relevant achievement to the attention of employers and learning providers. Schools can just facilitate recognition – in my kids’ school there are awards assemblies and any child can tell the school of something they want to be awarded for and they get a certificate and a round of applause.

I think the school worked more effectively with children of 10 and under than older children, although my experience only goes up to age 12. This is in part due to the pupils themselves – the enthusiasm and willingness to try everything seems to go in the senior school as the pupils have become more body and self conscious.
To sum up. We started in the state sector because I hoped it could be just as good for my kids’ attainment, and I did not want to desert the state sector. But all parents are the same in wanting the best for their children. If the state sector doesn’t deliver an equally good opportunity, it is human nature that parents who are able to will try the independent sector. I am a convert to that sector, and now know what I myself missed in the state sector. I believe that whatever education policies Scotland adopts, the independent sector should be strongly supported. It contributes hugely to Scotland, not just in attainment for children, but also in terms of job creation and contribution to Scotland’s economy.

Anna Sweet
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