Submission from Donna Burnett

Educational Attainment Gap – Involvement of Parents

I answer these questions from my own personal perspective as mum of 2 children: daughter who is age 20 and left school after S6 in 2013; son who is age 15 and currently in S3. My children attended Our Lady of Good Aid Cathedral Primary School and Our Lady’s High School, both Motherwell.

Do schools always explain clearly to parents how children learn throughout their school years and how parents could help their development (e.g. with reading and wider literacy approaches)?

My experience is that schools do not always do this. Some teachers do this really well but this does not happen consistently and the standard of information and advice I have received has varied considerably.

With regard to how I can support my child’s development, some teachers have provided advice on how I can support my child’s development, some have only provided this when asked and some do not provide this even when asked.

As my children have progressed through school I have found that I get more information directly from them regarding the support they feel they require. This support has not always been available from the school.

Are schools always flexible enough to allow parents to be involved in their child’s education (given parents’ work commitments, for example)?

In my experience parental involvement in secondary school is limited to parent meetings around specific topics/events, parent’s nights for feedback on child’s progress, pupil report, Parent Council, fundraising group and events. The schools my children have attended have been able to demonstrate flexibility regarding times of these meetings, individual appointments, etc. There is much less flexibility with regards to the approach and nature of parental involvement more closely related to improving educational attainment and supporting own child and other young people to improve their individual attainment.

What is the extent to which schools offer particular support to the parents of pupils from the most disadvantaged communities, in order to improve the attainment of those pupils?

I am not aware of particular support to parents of pupils from the most disadvantaged communities. Given the educational attainment gap it is clear that this is insufficient to lift the attainment of those children in a large proportion of cases. The level of support provided by more affluent parents to support their child’s development includes increasing levels of private tutoring and I am aware of an extensive number of existing and retired teachers who provide individual and group
tutoring. To my knowledge, the extent to which this contributes to educational attainment is yet to be investigated to be fully understood. The significance of this to the attainment levels in schools needs to be recognised as it disguises failings in our schools which the parents of pupils from the most disadvantaged communities are unable to supplement.

**Is there evidence to demonstrate which approaches used by schools have been most successful and whether these are being used, as appropriate, throughout Scotland?**

In my experience, and in taking account of the experiences of friends and family whose children are at a range of schools in different local authority areas, parental involvement appears to be better in primary schools than in secondary schools. This does vary greatly though across different schools and areas, from involvement of a few parents in Parent Councils and fundraising groups, to involvement in supporting your own child/ren, to involvement of parents in adding value to the educational experience of large groups of young people.

Parental involvement greatly improved in Our Lady of Good Aid Cathedral Primary School towards the end of my daughter’s time there when a new Head Teacher was appointed and it is my understanding that this has continued to improve. The parental involvement in this school goes beyond parents supporting their own children but includes parents, grandparents and guardians supporting young people to improve their reading skills, running after school clubs, and much more. This parental involvement stems from the head teacher’s leadership skills, ability to identify resources and utilise these, and ability to develop and nurture productive partnerships. Parental involvement is an ongoing process in the school and continues to evolve and improve. My observation is that it is not something that happens as an “add on” but is integrated into the operation of the school.

**Has greater parental involvement in school education through the Parental Involvement Act (2006) led to an improvement in pupil attainment?**

Not in my experience. I think that there is a significant amount of improved pupil attainment as a result of an increased use of private tutors, which came to my attention when my daughter reached 5th year and Higher qualifications. The extent to which this contributes to the educational attainment gap is not known but the attainment of young people in more affluent families who fund this additional support is evidence that it is likely to be significant.

Parental involvement by the education department within the local authority is very poor and they provide no leadership in terms of this. Last year I was involved in responding to a local consultation regarding a proposal to merge Our Lady’s High School, with another high school. This proposal was drawn up without any discussion with parents and as a result failed to meet the requirements to achieve improved educational benefits and in turn failed to achieve the support of parents, the community and the Learning and Leisure Committee, who rejected the proposal. At a time when pressure is on local authorities to make savings, this exercise failed at a substantial cost to the local authority in terms of the extensive amount of work.
on the proposal and the consultation. Attempts to achieve parental involvement in the development of a new proposal have failed.

Are there any new measures that could realistically be taken (for example, by the Scottish Government, local authorities, parents’ forums, the voluntary sector, etc) to help parents raise their child’s attainment?

I think that there is a wealth of untapped resources in families and local communities that would enhance the educational experience of young people. I also believe that local authorities have become so preoccupied with making financial cuts that they have lost sight of the contributions that can enhance their performance at little or no cost. In my experience local authority engagement of parents in creating the best educational outcome for all young people feels tokenistic.

It is important to gain a better understanding of the success factors for high attainment, including those additional resources and experiences provided for some pupils outside of school, to be able to provide sufficient support to increase attainment of those who do not have access to these resources and experiences.

Comparison with the independent school sector would also inform improvement in local authority schools. I appreciate that the cost of running an independent school is higher but it is a model that consistently performs better. There is a different model of parental and pupil engagement and involvement in the independent sector to learn from.

Parents do not need to be involved in supporting only their own children. In some areas there are examples of parents and other members of the school community mentoring young people, providing work placements, etc.

I am concerned that this consultation appears to be focussed on parents support to raise the attainment of their own children, as the African proverb says “it takes a village to raise a child”. The whole school community, including parents, should be engaged and utilised to improve the attainment of all of the children in a school.

I am happy to be contacted to discuss any of the above.