Submission to the Education and Culture Committee on the Attainment Gap – The Role of Third Sector Providers

Please find attached a report produced by the Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres (AHOEC) in Scotland. AHOEC membership includes Third Sector providers of residential experiences as well as private sector and local authority providers. The report was produced in large part to highlight the ways in which the residential experiences make significant contributions to both Attainment and Achievement.

Since the report was produced, recognition of the potential of the residential experience to improve attainment has continued to grow among teachers. This can be gauged from feedback, for example,

“The Royal High School has been using Dounans Centre to provide an outdoor residential learning experience with all our S1 pupils for the last five years. We keep going back as the people make it an outstanding experience. The leaders, instructors, cleaners and catering staff go out of their way to get it right for every child. In partnership with our school staff we are able to provide an experience which positively impacts on pupils’ skills for learning, life and work.” Residential course leader, Royal High School, March 2015

It may also be seen in emerging patterns of residential centre use by schools. For example, there is a significant increase in the number of Maths Study weekends. Some focus on their own revision and others intersperse their work with ‘chill-out’ activities. However this growth trend is occurring largely through word-of-mouth among teachers who attribute improvement in attainment to the study weekend.

We also have evidence of the effectiveness of the residential experience in triggering changes in behaviours away from those that impede learning. We can refer to a Social Return On Investment analysis (SROI) by independent consultants who looked at one class of 25 pupils in which two pupils had restricted their diet (eating only toast or crackers respectively) and one who was self-elective mute in school. During their residential stay, two started eating a wide range of healthy food options and the other started talking to teachers and singing in the shower; the teachers quipped they couldn’t shut her up if they wanted to.

Of course they didn’t because the pupils had been taken out of school on a regular basis to see either dieticians or psychologist over a period of 6 year with no noticeable improvement.
In fact, we see young people like this nearly every day at our Centres. We see the changes too. It is partly for this reason that the consultants undertaking the SROI determined that every £1 spent at SOEC results in over £11 of benefits. This is a high ratio.

However it also made us consider how SOEC, as a Third Sector organisation and Children’s Charity, can be instrumental in bringing about such remarkable changes. Our opinion is that we are able to combine 3 factors:

1. We develop specialist outdoor tutors, to identify and focus on the outcomes sought in CfE, and develop in young people the qualities, skills they need (such as confidence, team work, resilience etc.) both in the group and as individuals within the group;

2. We devise and deliver outdoor programmes and use adventure activities that are exciting and motivating for young people; and

3. We provide multi-day experiences in safe and nurturing away-from-home places – our residential Outdoor Centres.

In fact, there is a fourth factor – a young person’s innate ability to change. But it is the residential experience that can so effectively create the conditions in which young people feel confident enough to make their own changes.

These behaviours are barriers to learning and can be extremely tenacious. They concern both teachers and parents. The residential experience can help overcome them and in doing so, young people are in a much better position to focus on their studies; an essential precursor to addressing the attainment gap.

Yours sincerely

Dave Spence
Chief Executive