

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

Attainment and achievement of school aged children experiencing poverty

Visit to Queen Anne High School, Dunfermline

1 May 2018



Background

As part of its inquiry into attainment and achievement of school aged children experiencing poverty, the Committee visited Queen Anne High School (“QAHS”) in Dunfermline to learn about the school’s work to support children who are experiencing poverty.

As part of that visit the Committee also met with staff from St Serf’s RC Primary School in High Valleyfield.

At the outset, the Committee would like to thank Ruth McFarlane, Rector of QAHS, Catherine Mullen, Headteacher of St Serf’s, Carrie Lindsay, Executive Director of Education and Children’s Services, Fife Council, and all of the staff and young people who made the visit so informative.

Fife Council

The visit began with Carrie Lindsay briefing the Committee on Fife Council’s Education and Children’s Services.

Fife is a large local authority and Fife’s Education and Children’s Services serves around 40,000 children and employs 7,500 staff.

Around 6 years ago Fife renewed its focus on supporting children from poor background with a programme called “Breaking the cycle of disadvantage”. This

programme has been re-badged as Closing the Attainment Gap to reflect national priorities.

This programme has included an additional £3.5m on more family workers, para-professional staff in schools and a pedagogy team to support schools in areas of high deprivation. Fife has also invested £7.5m into Early Years and a more family-orientated approach. This includes new [Family Nurture Centres](#). Carrie stated that there is evidence of these approaches having an impact with the gap between the bottom and top quintiles reducing significantly; however this closing of the gap had slowed in recent times.

Carrie spoke about the importance of demonstrating the impact of programmes and interventions. She said that schools that had received direct Scottish Achievement Challenge (“SAC”) monies were in a good position in showing the impact and improvement of those programmes; the schools that only have received Pupil Equity Fund (“PEF”) monies were earlier in the process.

Carrie explained that Fife Council gave its heads a great deal of autonomy and it is for the heads to choose whether to begin an initiative in their own school. Fife Council has a number of initiatives that are available to schools designed to reduce the attainment gap, including programmes focusing on health and wellbeing or on improving numeracy and literacy.

Headteachers are free to initiate their own programmes. They are also accountable and must show that the programmes are making measurable improvements. Collaboration is also important, for example secondary heads agree some key principles but have freedom to run their own schools. School clusters¹ are also an important structure and Fife has invested in training for chairs of the clusters.

Carrie identified one of the key issues to reduce the attainment gap being to improve the work with families and to take a holistic approach to supporting children and families.

Carrie said that while Fife Council has a strong focus on closing the attainment gap, there is also a focus on raising attainment overall.

Queen Anne High School

The conversation moved onto the work of head teachers and the programmes in QAHS. This included members of the Senior Leadership team at QAHS, including the Rector Ruth MacFarlane, and Carrie Lindsay Executive Director of Education and Children's Services, Fife Council.

QAHS is a large school (c. 1500 pupils) and has pupils from a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds.

¹ I.e. a secondary school and its feeder primary schools.

Pupil Equity Fund

Fife Council has produced guidance for headteachers in using PEF. Managing procurement and HR procedures were identified as being a frustration for headteachers in delivering programmes using PEF. Education staff said that they had little direct experience in procurement rules and law and therefore would need to bow to the knowledge of colleagues in other areas of the local authority. Often, however, the issue was the length of time before procurement decisions could be approved by the council.

Some experience suggested that going through existing local authority contracts had increased costs compared to the open market.

Members were told that schools were unable to employ core teaching staff through PEF and there were in any case few teachers available. PEF monies needed to be spent on activities that provide additionality, for example she had employed a teacher to undertake an outdoor learning project. One of the barriers to employing staff through PEF she identified is the annual nature of the funding and therefore contracts could only be for 1 year.

Another issue that affects some heads is that they are targeted by a large number of outside organisations who offer services and are seeking to introduce programmes into schools funded through PEF. The council offers support to heads to help them to focus on achievable outcomes and link PEF funded activity to these outcomes. There is a focus on programmes that are sustainable and deliver longer term benefits and support for heads to develop models of change for their schools.

Links with Fife College and vocational education

Collaboration with Fife College was said to be patchy and improving. Service level agreements are agreed on a cluster model based on the high schools that are near to a particular campus of the college. These are used to agree courses and timetabling.

This collaboration was welcomed and works particularly well in supporting pupils from small and medium-sized schools to access a range of education. Location was also a key factor on the success of the collaboration as it is much easier to work together when the school and the campus are close. Timetabling college courses into the school day was identified as a challenge. Also some pupils who would benefit from the types of courses delivered by colleges may not be mature enough to thrive in the freer culture of colleges. There were also some concerns that key information, such as attendance, was not shared with schools. However, new leadership at the college is open to exploring diverse learning pathways and understands that there is room to work better with schools.

The key issue for Ms McFarlane is to ensure that her pupils have access to a variety of types of education. As a large school (c1500 pupils) she has the flexibility to offer a wide choice of progression routes. This included some Foundation Apprenticeships being offered within the school and a course delivered in partnership with West Fife Enterprise to deliver college-type courses on site (a wide range of activities e.g.

construction, health and safety, climbing). One of the benefits of diversifying the school offer would be to improve engagement with the school and therefore improve attainment in all areas.

Ms MacFarlane identified the role of a skilled time-tabler as being vital for providing a range of educational routes.

The school also has links with St Andrew's University and mentors work to highlight the benefits of higher education and broaden the horizons of pupils. Ms McFarlane noted that parity of esteem for a variety of learning pathways is important. She is conscious that she and her senior leadership team talk about supporting young people to high quality destinations, whether that be an apprenticeship, employment, college or university.

Parental engagement

The school has worked to diversify the membership of the parent council to better reflect the broad demographic mix of the school.

Ms McFarlane said that she has worked hard at ensuring her parents buy in to her approaches on broadening the curriculum and on narrowing the attainment gap.

Ms Lindsay said that the current metrics of success are not necessarily the correct ones (particularly the number of Highers attained) and that outcomes should better reflect the aspirations to provide a broader choice of learning pathways. This could then change the discourse and pressure on schools on what they should achieve.

Meetings with young people

The Committee was delighted to meet a number of young people from across the age-range of the school. Members learned about a number of initiatives to support young people and particularly young people from lower income families.

Some of the themes for these programmes were: a focus on broadening experience, a conscious approach to support health and wellbeing, the programmes being pupil-led, and participation on the pupils' terms. All of the children and young people spoke of increased levels of confidence and engagement with the school and learning.

Chickeneering

The school has a number of free-range chickens in the courtyard. The young people told members that they feed and look after the chickens, learning husbandry skills. This is often at lunchtimes and occasionally during lesson times. They also described how they enjoyed the experience and made friends with other who chose to help raise the chickens. The coop and run are peaceful places where they feel relaxed in a safe-space.

Members were very grateful for the gift of half a dozen delicious eggs each.

Drugs, Alcohol & Psychotherapies Limited (DAPL)

DAPL is a counselling service for pupils, families and teachers. In the school, DAPL practices 1-2-1 art therapy.

One pupil spoke about the benefits they had gained from attending DAPL. They said that they had been supported emotionally and the ability to cope with adversity had improved. DAPL had been shown to improve confidence and this has led to improved attendance.

School of Basketball

One pupil told members that they attend the Basketball club. They were introduced to the club while still in primary school and continued when they began at QAHS. As well as attendance, the club has improved confidence and communication skills in some pupils.

Equalities group

Some pupils talked to members about the equalities group. The group was given autonomy to decide on its work programme and focus. It decided to have broad focus looking at equalities issues for individuals with low income, LGBTI young people and race. The group provided training to teachers in an in-service day about how best to challenge prejudice and understanding the pupils' experience. It had also hosted a social day with other equalities groups from across Fife and invited speakers from Stonewall. The group was in the process of developing an equalities garden – a safe space for individuals to find a peaceful moment – and this was in the context of an awareness of mental health issues.

The young people said that taking part in the equalities group had helped with their confidence and ability to be themselves and challenge others' views.

Visit to China

QAHS had received a grant from the Confucius Institute to support them to twin with a high school in Tianjin. A group of pupils were taken for two weeks – one week in Beijing and one week at the high school in Tianjin. The school ensured that pupils who might not ordinarily have the opportunity to experience other cultures. The school supported families to obtain passports, visas, and fully funded the trip.

The pupils who spoke about the trip were clearly inspired by the experience. They said that their understanding of the world had been broadened and this had led them to focus more on school work.

Ms McFarlane said also that there was a benefit for the teachers who had taken lessons from the approach and pedagogy of the partner high school.

Anti-poverty group

A member of the school's anti-poverty group explained that they had chosen to focus both on the local community and internationally. At a school-level they had established a uniform Swap-Shop (see below). The group was largely led by senior pupils and they had been working to include younger pupils to get involved with its work.

One of the pieces of internationally-focused work was a fund-raising and awareness-raising campaign to help a school in Africa to build a toilet block. They had learned that having a safe toilet block was especially helpful for girls who had experienced sexual violence and this prevented them from attending school. Fundraising and awareness raising was designed and undertaken by the QAHS pupils themselves.

Swap shop

The members were shown the Swap Shop. This initiative had been pupil led from the start after one pupil during a growth spurt noted how many clothes he was getting through in a short period of time.

The swap shop started as just a box of old uniform and has grown so that it now occupies a small room off the corridor where guidance and pupil support is based. Pupils had learned how to launder, iron and display the clothes, along with improving their organisation and communication skills. They had achieved a Saltire award for volunteering.

Pupils can access the swap shop in several different ways and for different reasons. They can turn up to the shop, approach one of the young people who run the shop directly, or can obtain clothes through a guidance or pupil support teacher. There are a number of reasons a pupil may wish to use the service: to get appropriate uniform; to pick up a tie when they had left theirs at home; if they had had an accident and needed clothing; or indeed any other reason. The Swap Shop did not only have uniform; it also had coats, shoes and sanitary products.

The young people were very conscious of the risk of stigma for people using the Swap Shop. As well as giving people lots of ways to access the service, it was not promoted as an anti-poverty measure, rather as a sustainable way to reuse clothes.

To get clothes, pupils could swap for another item of clothing, pay a small donation, or just take what they needed.

The young people were very enthusiastic about the success of the Swap Shop and they had held stalls at the school's Christmas market and were actively promoting the model to the cluster's primary school, which they thought would normalise the service earlier and also benefit the pupils in those schools.

Nurture Hub

The members visited the Nurture Hub which was a relaxed classroom where pupils who need extra support get it in a different type of environment. Members visited at

the time when *Therapets* were in class. There were two dogs in the room as the group were doing a reading activity. The dogs helped the pupils focus and enjoy the work.

Programme of Supported Inclusion (PSI)

Members visited the school's PSI room. PSI is a restorative practice where pupils who have displayed problematic behaviours spend time as an alternative to temporary exclusion. Pupils are asked to reflect on their feelings and behaviours, to do work to support emotional intelligence and to keep up with their class work.

The number of exclusions had dramatically reduced at QAHS and very few of the pupils who had had a day in PSI have been re-referred.

Consolidation and Application of Learning Programme (CAOL)

CAOL is a holiday learning programme which allowed pupils to catch up or improve on learning in the school holidays. The Committee heard from someone who had benefitted from the programme and been supported in Maths and English. The programme had held a satellite class in a village in the catchment area to make it easier for people in that community to attend.

St Serf's Primary School

Members were joined by staff from St Serf's Primary School in High Valleyfield: Catherine Mullen, Headteacher, one of her senior leadership team and a classroom teacher. Also present was an Education Officer with Fife Council.

90% of St Serf's families live in an area in the first quintile of SIMD. However only 25% of pupils are registered for free school meals.



Ms Mullen explained how the school has approached closing the attainment gap since first being allocated SAC funding. She explained that at the outset she was too ambitious, not specific enough in her improvement targets, and also needed to take a more collaborative approach.

Since then, she and her school have taken a much more focused approach to closing the attainment gap. Targets were changed to be specifically on who would improve, when and how much. How the improvement would be measured and benchmarks are now set at the outset of any intervention.

The school has become better at identifying specific areas for improvement, planning and the collection and use of data. The school is now moving on to how to share that practice with other schools in its cluster.

This journey has been supported throughout by the local authority, and particularly a member of staff from the local authority coaching the leadership on how to manage and evaluate change.

Projects

The Playground

Playground Support Assistants (PSAs) identified behavioural issues in the playground, particularly when pupils were lining up. They were empowered to come up with their own solutions and encouraged to make their approaches data-led. The PSAs recorded the number of incidents and identified the children who were often involved. The PSAs displayed the quantitative data in the staff room. The PSAs then tried things out such as zoning the playground, games at lining up time, and more focused support. The number of incidents dropped dramatically.

The PSAs then explored with children who did not seem to enjoy breaks what a good playtime would be and adapted to support this. A number of pupils were also taking a long time to settle back into learning after break. Again a baseline was taken, with some children taking over 20 minutes to settle. PSAs supporting children has now reduced this to 2 minutes.

The demonstrable effectiveness of the PSA's data-led approach impressed the rest of the school's staff.

Nursery

Ms Mullen told Members that a number of children who attend the nursery are language deprived and this limited engagement with books and story-time. Nursery staff took a strategic approach and made story-time more engaging (e.g. using puppets) and consistent. This approach led to an improvement in engagement in story-time from 33% to 100%.

Nursery staff are now empowered to try new things that might demonstrate improvements.

P6 Literacy

The classroom teacher explained that she identified an area of improvement for the class in writing in a well-structured way with punctuation. While there are a diverse set of needs in the class, she assessed the needs of the whole class at the outset and this was common need. She therefore designed, with the support of the leadership team, an intervention of writing every day. She defined success as writing 3 sentences that were well structured and punctuated (out of the whole writing exercise) and took a baseline figure. She then agreed targets and stretch targets for herself and her class and measured progress on a daily and weekly basis. She shared the targets with the class and obtained buy-in from the pupils.

She found that not all of her approaches worked and adapted her approaches as the project went on. By using the simple measure of success she could see immediately what was working and with whom. This gave her the freedom and confidence to try out new things and gave an insight to her pupils' learning styles.

She has exceeded her stretch targets and closed the attainment gap.

Model for improvement

Timely and consistent measurement of progress was key to St Serf's model for improvement members were told about.

This required teaching staff to learn how to decide on how to measure outcomes and to collect and measure data. Having a robust system of measurement has allowed teachers to take more risks and try new things. They are afforded autonomy and expected to be accountable for their decisions. If something isn't working, it will become apparent and approaches can be changed.

The teachers are then armed with evidence about what works and are better able to share that with their colleagues within school and across their cluster.

This same dynamic of trust and accountability similar to the relationship between the headteacher and central local authority staff the Committee heard about. Ms Mullen said that her relationship with her Education Officer was both challenging and supportive. Ms Mullen is challenged to explain exactly what impact her plans will have and is coached on how to take a data-led and evidence-based approach. This is also helpful in reporting on the impact that SAC and PEF monies have had.

The Committee heard that SAC and PEF have led to more accountability. This data-rich approach is being taken on by other schools across Fife who, with the advent of PEF, are going through the same learning curve that St Serfs had earlier (as a school in receipt of SAC monies). The Committee were told that, to be effective, change must come from the schools themselves with crucial support and coaching from the local authority to build capacity in the schools.