



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 31 March 2015

Session 4

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EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

8th Meeting 2015, Session 4

CONVENER

*Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)

*Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP)

*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)

*Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD)

*Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Shona Crawford (West Dunbartonshire Council)

Iain Ellis MBE (National Parent Forum of Scotland)

Dr Sarah Morton (University of Edinburgh)

Eileen Prior (Scottish Parent Teacher Council)

Jackie Tolland (Parent Network Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 31 March 2015

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:02]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning, everybody. Welcome to the eighth meeting in 2015 of the Education and Culture Committee. I remind everybody to ensure that all electronic devices are switched off or are at least on silent at all times, as they can interfere with the sound system. We have received apologies from Gordon MacDonald, who is unable to be with us.

Our first item is to decide whether to consider items 3 and 4 in private. Do members agree to take the items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Educational Attainment

10:02

The Convener: Our next item is our third evidence session on educational attainment. This week, we are asking how parents, including guardians, and schools can best work together to raise the attainment of all pupils, particularly those whose attainment is at the lower end of the scale.

We have received a large number of written submissions, including from today's witnesses, and the committee would like to thank all those who have contributed to our discussions.

We commissioned the Scottish Parliament information centre to undertake a small survey of parents and guardians to inform the process, and I am delighted that we have received over 2,500 responses. I thank SPICe for doing that work and I thank those who responded to the survey. We will be discussing some of the key findings during our meeting.

I welcome Dr Sarah Morton from the University of Edinburgh, Iain Ellis MBE from the national parent forum of Scotland, Jackie Tolland from Parent Network Scotland, Eileen Prior from the Scottish Parent Teacher Council, and Shona Crawford from West Dunbartonshire Council. Good morning to you all. We have quite a large panel of five. I will make my usual comment: you do not all have to answer every question, but if you have something particular and different to add, please indicate that to me and I will try to come to you.

We now move straight to questions, because there is a lot that we want to cover this morning. I will begin by asking about the survey that we undertook and your views on it. What does the witness panel see as being the most significant findings from the survey?

Eileen Prior (Scottish Parent Teacher Council): The survey findings reflect that the parents who are involved feel involved and generally have a positive impression of how that engagement works for them.

Our biggest challenge, however, is the parents who did not respond. The committee's analysis of the survey respondents is pretty good; many parents out there are not engaged, and it is their voices—the voices that are most relevant to this evidence session—that we are not hearing.

Jackie Tolland (Parent Network Scotland): Most of the parents we in Parent Network Scotland come into contact with have themselves had difficult education experiences and tend to be the ones who would not answer surveys. It is also quite hard to engage those for whom English is a

second language or who have issues with literacy. Although the survey findings appear to be quite good, there is a definite gap in them, especially in respect of the lack of the parents with whom we engage.

The Convener: Okay. Does anybody else want to add anything?

Iain Ellis MBE (National Parent Forum of Scotland): I agree with everything that my colleagues have said.

Dr Sarah Morton (University of Edinburgh): It might be worth thinking about ways to boost the sample in order to select the people who are most relevant, or about holding focus groups in agencies that work with those harder-to-reach parents.

The Convener: There are a number of caveats with the survey—not least of which is the fact that it surveyed a self-selecting group of respondents who were likely to be the most engaged parents. It was also rather Edinburgh-centric and included a large number of parents whose children attend independent schools.

Accepting that, it is interesting to note that parents who have children at independent schools are much more satisfied with the information that is provided to them to support their children's education than are the parents of children who attend state schools. The latter group of parents is clearly engaged and wants to be involved with their children's education, but a much lower proportion of them indicated that the level of information with which they are being provided to support their children is satisfactory. Do witnesses have views on the fact that that self-selecting group of parents, who are engaged and who want to be involved in their children's education, still feel that they are not getting the information that they require?

Dr Morton: In the evidence review that I have brought to the committee today, there is a study that looks at issues of culture. Most teachers are middle class and white and the parents who engage are, on the whole, from the same cultural and socioeconomic group. That presents a real challenge.

The fundamental model at fee-paying schools is different: the parents are customers. In mainstream education there is a completely different basis for the transaction between parents and the school. The evidence that we have shows that a lot of the good practice is coming from outside Scotland and looks very different from the dominant culture here. There is still a sense that parents are seen as a bit of a nuisance in lots of schools here, and that there is a bit of trying to hold people at arm's length. We do not have a culture that is focused on keeping parents on side,

which independent sector schools absolutely must have.

The Convener: Is that entirely down to the cash?

Dr Morton: There is a different model in the independent sector, because the schools need to keep the parents happy—the parents feel that they are paying for a service, which includes knowing what is going on, and they expect that their children will achieve very highly. Much of the evidence shows that those expectations are what it is about; when parents expect high achievement it opens up a lot of other opportunities. If we take out all of the other factors that we know affect attainment—if we control for factors such as class and the level of the mother's education—the involvement of a parent or guardian or carer in a child's education will raise that child's attainment. It is a fantastic lever that we know works across all the different groups.

The Convener: I accept what you are saying, but I am interested in the fact that clearly many parents of children who attend state schools—even those who are very engaged and middle class, who want to do the best for their children and to support them, who respond to surveys such as ours and who are probably on the parent-teacher groups and involved in the school—still feel that they are not getting sufficient information to support their children's education. Why do they feel that way, given their level of engagement?

Eileen Prior: I cannot speak for the independent sector—the Scottish Parent Teacher Council does not really operate there. There are a number of factors at play in the state sector. The primary one is the lack of partnership between many schools and their parent groups. From the SPTC perspective, education of our children should be a shared endeavour—it is an area in which both parents and professionals have an interest. Unfortunately, we are in a culture in which many teachers want parents just to let them get on with their job, and in which some parents say that we should just let the teachers get on with their job. That is not good enough. The evidence says that we have to be in a shared space supporting our children, so we will never get the results that we want from our young people as long as a divide is created by saying, "Let us get on with our job and let them do what they're supposed to do."

Dr Morton: The evidence also has quite a lot to say about communication. It suggests that the main fault is that schools tend to broadcast; they communicate but are not good at listening. The evidence is really strong that communication between parents and schools is as much about schools listening to parents as it is about them giving out information. This is largely about schools finding out what different groups of

parents want and meeting that need, rather than just broadcasting information. In the social media age, it has become much easier to send information to everyone, but that may not be what people want.

Shona Crawford (West Dunbartonshire Council): There is a much more complex picture for state schools when it comes to partnership with parents; it is not just about the high-achieving parents wanting high achievement for their children, as is the case in the independent sector. State schools have to think about how they engage different groups of parents. In, for example, a primary school in West Dunbartonshire there will be a mixed group of parents, some of whom are keen to engage while others have no confidence to do so. Schools cannot have a policy that offers only one type of engagement or involvement.

If we really want to raise attainment, the challenge is in engaging the families of our most vulnerable young people. Those families are not sure what they can contribute in schools and are not confident about coming into schools, so a lot of time needs to be spent on giving them a voice. The challenge for our schools is in how they can create the time to give very personal support. They might have to go to the parents' home first rather than expect the parents to have the confidence to come into school to talk about their young people; it may be necessary to go to see where the parents are at in order to encourage them in.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I am delighted that Shona Crawford said that, because as I was listening to the previous responses I sensed that we were drifting into an area in which surprise was being expressed that there is not, for whatever reasons, more engagement between aspirant middle-class parents and schools. We seem to have moved away from those who are most in need of intervention in terms of the attainment gap that we are seeking to address.

Do we need to get the culture right so that engagement happens across the board, and is it inevitable that there will be engagement with parents whose children are already achieving very well before we can widen such engagement across the piece? Alternatively, should we target our efforts to ensure that we address those who are most in need of engagement right now in the knowledge that that may percolate out more widely?

Shona Crawford: We should target those who are most in need if we want to make a difference in the attainment gap. I agree with the panel's view that parental involvement in children's learning is essential, but we know that the gap is already well established by the time children start school, so

we must be in there much earlier to give parents the skills to enable them to adopt appropriate approaches to support their children's learning. That is not a task for schools on their own; there is a role for schools to be community hubs and to engage with parents, but they cannot do it on their own. They have neither the capacity nor the time to do so; it is time consuming for the teachers and others who are involved. There has to be multi-agency involvement in schools if we are to reach the most vulnerable parents and help them to gain the confidence to support their children's learning.

Liam McArthur: Does not that butt up against the slight problem that arises in a range of areas, whereby stigma is attached to such support because it is seen as being other than the norm in the school environment?

10:15

Shona Crawford: Yes—that is exactly what we found when we surveyed our most vulnerable parents in West Dunbartonshire. We have a parenting strategy to roll out parenting support. Parents objected to the idea of the offered support because it seemed to be stigmatising, so we are now trying to badge things as “opportunities for parents”. It may seem to be a moot point, but the language with which we try to engage parents is very important; we have to get the language right and offer opportunities across the board, so that the support is not targeted but universal.

Clearly, as we offer opportunities, we are thinking about the needs of our most vulnerable parents and how they will be able to access those opportunities. That is time consuming, and we need more than teachers working at that.

Eileen Prior: We should be very cautious about focusing all our attention on families and parents: we are talking about a culture within schools. The survey identified that even parents who are engaged and involved do not feel that communication is as good as it could be.

To bring about a culture shift within our schools, there is a great deal of work to be done in teacher education to ensure that our teachers understand the critical role that families play, how to work in partnership with families, and why that is important.

There is also work to be done with our school leaders. As I said in our submission, in some schools there is a sense that parents are seen as a nuisance and part of the problem, and that schools would get on fine if only parents would do as they are supposed to do. We cannot continue to work in that way within our two camps. We have to achieve a shared space in which parents and teachers recognise each other's roles and the value that each brings. It is not simply a case of

fixing broken families; it is about ensuring that the culture within schools shifts to the point at which the shared endeavour is recognised.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I want to explore some of the issues around consistency. A number of the submissions that we have received refer to specific initiatives to improve parental engagement and educational attainment. Specifically, Wester Hailes education centre has provided very useful data that shows how it has improved parental engagement dramatically so that 90 per cent of parents attended parent meetings in 2013-14 compared with only 30 per cent in 2012-13. That is amazing.

North Ayrshire Council says that

“there is no evidence to demonstrate which approaches used by schools have been most successful and are being used throughout Scotland.”

A number of submissions have highlighted inconsistencies across Scotland and concerns about how well education authorities collect data on what works or does not work. Is there any evidence to demonstrate the most effective means of involving parents?

Eileen Prior: There is a completely mixed bag of anecdote and evidence—gathered, for the most part, from outwith Scotland—on what difference parental involvement makes and which models work best.

We highlighted in our submission that the SPTC is starting a programme to take forward the partnership schools model, which comes from the United States. We are doing that because the model is evidence based. The programme is housed within Johns Hopkins University and has 30 years of practice and research to back it up.

We are taking forward the programme because we see it as more than just a good idea that we have dreamt up in a dark room of an evening. The programme is evidence based and has been shown to improve partnership with families and the attainment of young people.

The short answer is no—there is no evidence on the most effective means of involving parents, certainly not within the Scottish context.

The Convener: Dr Morton, I know that you have written extensively on the subject; could we hear your views?

Dr Morton: You will see from the evidence review that we were commissioned to undertake, and which the Scottish Government has made available on a website for schools to use, that a lot of the evidence is not from Scotland, although there are some little bits that are.

It tends to be initiatives that are measured, rather than broad strategy, because it is easier to measure individual initiatives than a strategy. There are lots of examples in that review of the sorts of things that people can do. However, to make things consistent across different schools and communities, it is better to think about what the evidence tells us as a whole—what schools need to do, broadly, to improve parental engagement across all their parent groups.

First, schools have to understand who those parent groups are and what the groups want, and that needs to be quite nuanced for different groups of parents and different needs. Then, there are the six dimensions of family engagement that are in the review. If all schools were doing all those things there would be some consistency, even if they did them differently.

The dimensions are: making sure that parents have enough opportunities to understand their child’s education and development needs; collaborating with the community and co-ordinating resources across community groups; providing opportunities for volunteering; making sure that there is good information about learning at home—the learning at home dimension is important not just at primary school but right through school; communication, which is about listening as well as getting information out there; and involving parents in decision making.

If all schools were working on all the dimensions in the way that worked best for their community, it might look a little different in different places—because they are serving different communities and schools vary so hugely in size and scope—but that would be one way to start building in some consistency. It would also allow people to try out some of the initiatives that look promising and to build an evidence base that is relevant to Scotland about what works.

Colin Beattie: Given that, as you have highlighted, there are potentially different approaches, why is progress inconsistent? The approaches can be different, but surely we should be seeing some consistency in progress across Scotland, and I do not think that we are seeing that.

The Convener: Before we move on—some other people want to respond—may I just check something, Dr Morton? You have helpfully supplied a list of the six dimensions of family engagement that you just set out. Are they happening—is this going on now?

Dr Morton: I do not know much about what is going on, but there is not a policy saying that every school must have a parental engagement strategy, for example, so I wonder what schools

feel they are obliged to do. You would have to find out about that, because I am not sure.

The Convener: I will ask Shona Crawford.

Shona Crawford: Some schools are doing those things. I can think of schools in West Dunbartonshire where there is evidence of almost all the factors being used in how they engage with parents. However, our data is not good on whether that is having a big impact on attainment.

A lot of schools, although certainly not all of them, are attempting to develop parental engagement. We need to enhance schools' capacity to do that, because doing all these things is time consuming. Getting enough support from the community is a challenge in these economic hard times, when we are facing reductions in staffing to support schools, but certainly these things are happening.

The Convener: Everybody else wants to come in, so we will start with Iain Ellis and then hear from Jackie Tolland and Eileen Prior.

Iain Ellis: Progress has been mentioned, but I would say that parental involvement is going down rather than up across Scotland. That is partly because of the workload that schools now have. We are pushing forward attainment, but my question is: what is attainment? How are we measuring attainment?

In all the references that we are looking at just now, attainment is being measured only with qualifications. We need to stop that—we need to stop saying how many highers the kids get—and we need something about wider achievement. Insight, the benchmarking tool, must start looking at tariff scores for wider achievement. I think that if we start scoring the tariff points properly on wider achievement, the attainment gap will close—that could be a quick hit for you. Therefore, the big question is about what attainment is and what is being measured.

As for the workload in schools, I should point out that, in one of my schools, the headteacher and the two depute headteachers are virtually in class full time, because they cannot get any supply teachers. How can they have parental involvement if they are busy doing other things in the school? It is all to do with the budget restraints that we are now under and the fact that people are prioritising.

The big thing just now is attainment, and because of that, people are taking their finger off the pulse with regard to parental involvement. As I have said, we need to look at what attainment means. I have attended and presented at all the secondary headteacher events across Scotland, and I have had some interesting discussions with headteachers, who are concerned that everything is being pushed in the direction of qualifications. I

would like to have a discussion about attainment and what people think it means.

Jackie Tolland: We have a huge untapped resource, which is the parents. There are parents in communities who are absolutely ready to support each other and to skill up parents to prepare and support other parents for the transition when their kids go to school. Those parents might not be working, for various reasons—they might be having breaks in their own employment, perhaps because they have just had babies—but there is a huge range of them and, as I have said, they form a huge untapped resource. We could look at rolling out that kind of approach to support other parents.

Eileen Prior: I want to make two points, the first of which picks up on Mr Beattie's question about why there is no consistency. One reason for that is that it is not measured and therefore not valued. Because the inspections that are carried out by Education Scotland do not significantly review how a school reaches out to its parent population and because schools are measured on other things, the issue comes way down the list of priorities as far as schools are concerned. We have to be aware of that.

Interestingly, with regard to the six means of involving parents that are highlighted on the poster that Dr Morton referred to, they are absolutely what the partnership schools programme does and they come from the partnership schools model that we are rolling out. Again, research shows that engagement with families and communities on those six areas starts to make a difference to how young people do at school.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On the same theme, I have to say that I was annoyed by the comment that parents whose children go to independent schools are customers. In fact, parents who send their children to state schools also pay; we pay our taxes and our council tax. We might not hand a cheque to the school every month, but we are still customers, and I am annoyed that there is almost an assumption that parents do not have a voice because they are not customers. We are actually paying through the nose; indeed, it is the biggest level of expenditure on education.

I do not know whether anyone wants to comment on that, but I wanted to make that comment.

The Convener: Let us move on to the questions, Mary.

Mary Scanlon: Convener, I think that that comment is worth making—in fact, it is worth making a few more times. It should not be assumed that we do not have any rights.

I return to the research that the convener referred to. I note that 85 per cent of parents whose children go to independent schools strongly agree or agree that it is

“Easy to get information ... about how my child is progressing”,

while 50 per cent of parents whose children go to local authority schools strongly agree or agree. Moreover, on the question whether the school helps parents to understand and support their children’s learning, 86 per cent of parents whose children are at independent schools and 50 per cent of parents whose children are at local authority schools agree or strongly agree. My point is that it costs no money to help parents understand their children’s education or to give information.

Iain Ellis tells us in his submission that at the end of the school year a parent was told, “Oh, your child failed a maths test five times in a row.” Why was the parent not told when the child failed the test the first time so that they could help? I also found Mr Ellis’s analogy about a parent getting more information about an MOT than about their child’s education absolutely horrific.

On top of that, I see that the City of Edinburgh Council is looking at cutting 1,200 support staff. When I look at councils, I can think of no better example than what seems to be happening in Renfrewshire, which shows that it is not the case that councils cannot do any of this activity. According to its submission, Renfrewshire Council is starting with the early years, and it is working with the University of Glasgow and the University of Strathclyde on these matters. The fact is that it is not hugely costly to identify a child’s attainment or lack of attainment, so if this is a culture problem, can it not be overcome overnight?

10:30

Dr Morton: In the evidence review, you will see one very promising initiative that is internet based. Some schools are starting to publish test results online and in some places—Australia, I think—parents can log in through online classrooms and look at them. That has instantly increased the number of parents getting in touch with the school. Interestingly, when I presented the initiative to a secondary school in Edinburgh, the teachers reacted by saying, “But parents will be getting in touch with us and using up our time.”

To return to your previous comment, I think that the cultural point is not that parents whose children go to state schools should not feel like customers, but that they do not feel like customers and that, because of that less direct and less obvious customer model, they are not treated in that way.

As far as attitudes are concerned, I found that conversation with the teacher interesting. If a parent gets in touch and has a 10-minute conversation with a teacher about their child, those 10 minutes might be able to raise that child’s attainment more than the teacher can over the whole year. That is the reality, but that is not the teacher’s view.

Shona Crawford: I do not deny that there is a lot of work to be done and that we do not have consistency, but I am a bit concerned about knocking schools, particularly when I know that many of those with whom I work turn head over heels in trying to involve parents in realistic ways.

There is no simple answer to the question of how to get parents involved. Many schools have found that parents do not come to workshops or parents nights; however, they come to see their children perform and, as a result, the schools have put in place a lot of initiatives in which children are performing or invite their parents to come and see their work. Through that kind of activity, schools have been able to inform parents a bit better about the curriculum and how they might engage.

In other schools, teachers give a lot of their free time in the evenings to support parenting programmes such as incredible years or families and schools together that are hugely life transforming for some of our families in challenging areas. As I have said, however, they do that work in the evenings, and it is hugely costly on a personal level. I therefore make the plea that, although there is more to be done, we should focus on schools that are doing a lot of good work and try to capitalise on that.

Eileen Prior: That segues in very nicely with the point that I wanted to make: can we just stop dreaming up ideas and start looking at what works? The lack of focus on the evidence base in Scottish education drives me mad. We have lots of schools all over Scotland doing bits of good work, and we do not bring together any of that or focus on what works.

As well as focusing on the evidence base, we need a consistent approach. That does not mean that we would have people doing exactly the same thing, but it would ensure a common approach across schools.

I do not think that it would take a great deal to improve the situation for many parents; for those parents in your survey who are already committed or engaged but who feel that that engagement is not good enough, it would not take a lot to change things. We could therefore focus a lot of energy on parents who struggle to get engaged and whom the schools struggle to engage.

Mary Scanlon: I know that, in Moray, parents with children in early years education or childcare

can log in every day and see what letter, word or whatever their child has learned at the nursery. That allows them to focus on it, too. I do not know how widespread that initiative is, but I know that it is part of the Care Inspectorate's expectations at the end of the year, and I note that Moray is a very mixed area with rich and poor families. I will just throw that in—I know that Jackie Tolland has an answer.

The Audit Scotland report "School Education", which is mentioned in the submission from the national parent forum, states that there is no consistent means of monitoring or tracking achievement or attainment between primary 1 and secondary 3, and that 27 out of 32 local authorities are buying expensive private sector tests—many of them from England—so there is no comparison at all. What needs to happen to ensure that there is consistency in identifying children who are falling behind in class and supporting them to keep pace with the rest of the class? What do we need to do to ensure that that gap is identified and addressed?

Jackie Tolland: The initiative that you mentioned is another area in which there could be a barrier. If a parent does not have access to a computer, and their child knows that other parents are logging in and says, "You're not doing that," that could be an issue, but the initiative itself is a great idea.

It all goes back to confidence—

Mary Scanlon: Is that a reason not to do it?

Jackie Tolland: No, that is not a reason not to do it. I am saying that access could be a barrier for a parent, especially if they live in a remote area and they do not have access to a computer.

It goes back to confidence for parents—

Mary Scanlon: If the parent turns up every day to pick up the child, the school could just give them a note.

Jackie Tolland: Yes—we need to open up every avenue, because no child or parent is the same, and we all learn differently. We need to find all the different ways to do it, and we need to build the capacity in the community so that parents have the confidence to approach the school. If the parents do not have the confidence, it does not matter whether we have all those avenues open—they will not do it. We need to find a way of building their confidence and their trust in the relationships between—

Mary Scanlon: So the early years are a good place to start.

Jackie Tolland: They are a fabulous place to start.

Iain Ellis: I have a few points. As Mary Scanlon said, what we say in our submission probably is quite horrific in places. However, although we highlighted a few bad things in our submission, there is good stuff going on throughout the country. We have a representative who gets a text every day; they have an app on their phone so that the teacher can say, "Your child did this today," and send pictures, and at the end of the week they get a bigger message. There is excellent stuff going on across the board.

On the point about how we measure attainment, we ran a working group last year that produced the document "Sharing Learning, Sharing Assessment: Report for Parents". A lot of parents did not know where their kids were in broad general education. In the old system, with A to E grades, they knew exactly where they were, but now they do not know which strands their child is working on.

Part of the issue is that there was a transition for teachers too, and they were not too sure about the new system. I do not know what is best: do we want to go back to testing in S3 and P3? I do not think that that is what we want—

Mary Scanlon: They do continual assessment now.

Iain Ellis: Yes. At the previous committee meeting I attended, I caused a bit of controversy, and I will give you some more today. I personally think that we are teaching our kids too young. We are talking about moving down to primary, but we need to realise that these are kids. Are we teaching them too much, too soon? If we look at the rest of the world, we see that some other countries do not do that. Kids learn to play with each other instead. I am going to be a wee bit controversial and say that perhaps we need to juggle the system again a wee bit. Maybe it is not working in the way it should. I think that we are teaching our kids too much, too young.

Mary Scanlon: Do you think that they start school too young—is that what you are saying?

Iain Ellis: Yes.

Mary Scanlon: At what age should they start school?

Iain Ellis: I think that we need to have that discussion—possibly they could start at six or seven. I am not saying that there should not be a system for them, but it should be more nursery based and play based, rather than children being brought in to start school at four and a half or five. I look at what the Scandinavian countries are doing and what they are achieving, and I think, "Are we maybe pushing it?" You asked whether we should be starting earlier in the early years, but

alarm bells start ringing with me when I hear that, because we are talking about young kids.

The Convener: Thank you. Two members want to ask supplementary questions. I ask them to be quick. Liam McArthur is first, to be followed by Chic Brodie.

Liam McArthur: I want to follow up on something that Eileen Prior said about Education Scotland not testing this during inspections. Education Scotland is responsible for providing support following any investigation. Is there an opportunity for it to say, "One way of addressing the issues that we have identified is through these examples of parental engagement," and to work through the six strands? They are being deployed in many schools, but they are not necessarily being deployed consistently across the board. Should we invite Education Scotland to bake this into the support that it offers to schools?

Eileen Prior: I absolutely agree with that. If we are saying that the influence of family is so important—and the evidence is there—in supporting our children to do the best they can, part of what schools do must be to support families to support their children, which involves working with families and communities.

That work absolutely has to be part of the process that Education Scotland goes through when it does a school inspection, and it has to be part of the picture post-inspection. As you say, it should be baked in so that it is part of the picture. I believe that it is part of what schools should be doing. At the moment, it is an add-on. There is a pick and mix, and people say, "We'll do this bit and that bit." It should not be like that. It should be an integral part of what every school does to assess its parent population, who its families are and what it has to do to reach out to them in order to embed the school and what it is doing within its community.

The Convener: Does anybody disagree with that?

Iain Ellis: No. Education Scotland is evaluating that, and we are in discussions with it, because we think that it is a big internal part that they are missing in inspections. I hope that things will start to change in the short term.

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): Good morning. I was going to ask a question about the quality of leadership and community, but I will come back to that. It has to come from schools.

My question is for Dr Morton. We talk about families, and in some cases they have single parents. On page 27 of your report, you talk about engaging with fathers. It seems to have improved somewhat, but why is there such a lack of engagement with fathers within overall parental

engagement? It appears to be a major element in developing the currency of aspiration.

Dr Morton: It is not surprising at all, because most of the people who look after children are mothers, or women. It is kind of inevitable. Although times are changing, if you go to any primary school playground, at least three quarters of the people you see will be the mothers. On the whole, it is women who are caring and doing the work around schools, so it is not surprising that we have ended up with many more women than men being engaged, although there is a bit of a shift taking place.

There is not an obvious link between a positive outcome and who it is that is engaged—it matters just that a parent or carer is engaged. However, in some cases, there will only be a father, and we have to think carefully about how we engage those fathers. I suppose that we should look across the board and, with any particular school, ask which parents we need to engage and whether we want to do something that is specifically aimed at fathers. I would hate to see that become the driver, but it is important to—

Chic Brodie: Sorry to interrupt you, but you say in your report:

"The presence and engagement of fathers is positively associated with children's intellectual development, social competence, and emotional well-being".

Dr Morton: Yes, but there is not a comparator of mothers. That is true of a lot of the research on mothers or fathers—there is quite often not a comparator. If we look across the evidence as a whole, we see that, as long as a parent is engaged, it does not matter who it is.

When researchers have looked at children who have fathers who are engaged, they have found some positive effect, but it is hard to measure that against children who have a mother who is engaged; there is not an equivalent piece of research. The research on gender is quite complicated to interpret, but we were asked to look at fathers in the review. If schools are going to start to strategise around the issue and to think about how they are engaging parents, they must have different kinds of parents in mind, and that means thinking not just about mothers but about fathers.

It is easy for us to focus on early years and primary schools, but since the evidence came in there has been a report from a study in England showing that, even among children who are doing relatively well at 11, the least advantaged fall behind massively during the secondary school years, so it is important also to keep secondary school in mind.

10:45

Jackie Tolland: We must also open out the support that families have, because there could also be a grandparent, aunt or uncle involved. It is a question of looking at the family dynamic and working out who is the best person, because the parents may have to work full time and may not always be able to make it to school, so schools should research the make-up of the family and decide who is the best person to contact to support the child. It is not just about parents.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Workload has been touched on today and in previous evidence sessions, and teachers' representatives have spoken about the very high workload and the demands on their time in class. Is it possible for classroom teachers to make parental engagement a priority? If so, how do we make teachers treat it as a priority, rather than saying, "Keep out of the classroom and let me get on with my job"?

Eileen Prior: We all agree that teachers and parents want the best for their children, so it is not a competition. If teachers were more effectively engaging with the parents, that would make their job easier. If we engaged more effectively with families and kids were there more, so there was less absenteeism, the kids would do better and it would make teachers' jobs easier. There is a whole load of things that parental involvement can influence that will make a teacher's job easier and improve the attainment levels of young people, thereby giving positive feedback to schools that they are achieving more for their young people. We cannot look at it as a bolt-on. If we do it well, not only will it impact on outcomes for young people, it will make schools a better and more welcoming place to be, and the kids who go there will go more regularly, attend better to their classes and do better. It is a win-win situation.

Iain Ellis: Things have changed over the years. Back in the days before the Dunblane massacre—and I hate to bring that up—you could approach teachers when your kids were going into the school. Since Dunblane, I have heard that schools still use a system that makes it hard to get to teachers. Now you have to go through the headteacher to get to a teacher, so that personal relationship has dwindled quite a bit. If you want to see a teacher, you virtually have to get an appointment, whereas you used to be able to get a quick, two-minute discussion before the day started or afterwards. It is hard to get to the teacher and, as I said, the workload is now vast. If schools cannot get supply staff to release the teacher, there is no spare time during the day when you can go in to see them, so it is very hard to engage.

Jackie Tolland: We recently made a presentation to trainee teachers about how to engage parents, and the feedback was that they found it really useful and that it was not something that they had thought about before we went to speak to them. They felt that it was something that they could probably use, and perhaps in preparing children and parents for school we can also start to prepare teachers to engage with parents.

Shona Crawford: With the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and getting it right for every child, children and families are at the centre of the planning. That has required local authorities to address teachers' training and to help them to put in place methods of putting children, parents and families at the centre of planning. That should have an impact on the dialogue between teachers and parents, because they will be planning together.

The Convener: Is the roll-out of the provisions in the 2014 act and the focus on GIRFEC having—or will it have—an impact?

Shona Crawford: Yes, absolutely.

Dr Morton: Part of it is about selling to teachers what parental engagement can achieve. That is not just about better exam results and higher attendance rates but about pupils behaving better, attending more regularly, adapting better and having better networks. Teachers need to be won over to the idea. The evidence is clear that there are a lot of benefits. I suppose that we are talking again about a culture change and moving people on to thinking differently about what the relationship is.

Mark Griffin: Training was mentioned. North Ayrshire Council suggests that local authorities invest in training for teachers particularly around parents evening. Parents evenings are a valuable exchange on how a child is developing. Teachers will learn about their pupils' behaviour at home and parents will know exactly what they need to go away and work on. Do you agree that that is a crucial part of parental engagement? If not, are there any other engagement issues that schools must address?

Eileen Prior: I am afraid that I do not agree that a five-minute interview with a teacher is sufficient to achieve all that—it simply is not. If we are to have a change in thinking on how parents support their children and how teachers and parents work together to support children, that will not be achieved in five minutes. I am not saying that that should not be done, because it helps. However, it is such a tiny part of what should be going on that we must get it into perspective.

A group of youngsters who we are forgetting in this discussion and who are the most in need of support are those who are looked after. They are

the most vulnerable in our schools and their attainment and achievement levels are at the lowest, yet they do not have the benefit of parents at home who are potentially going to get involved. We need to capture somewhere that we must have a mechanism of support for looked-after youngsters.

I heard someone say, "Every child needs somebody who's mad about them." That is absolutely true. All our kids need someone who is mad about them. I am mad about my kids. Looked-after kids tend to lack that adult who is mad about them. We must ensure that we insert somewhere in the system an adult who takes on that role, so that there is an adult who is mad about a youngster and the youngster is equally mad about them.

Iain Ellis: I call parents evening speed dating. All that a parent does, especially in secondary school, is race around from one teacher to another.

Eileen Prior: And miss most of them.

Iain Ellis: Yes—or you find someone is in your place.

The big thing about parents night is that teachers need to tell parents negative things and not just positive things. If something is not working—if someone has failed five maths tests—they need to tell the parents early on; they must not wait until the end of term. I have been in that situation when I turned up to a parents night in June to be told bad news about my daughter concerning something that had happened six months previously. Teachers must be able to say, "Look, this is what's happening—you need to do stuff," rather than just showing the parents the good things that their child is doing in class.

Training was mentioned. We did a big thing with the fourth-year student teachers at the University of Strathclyde, following a conversation I just happened to have. The university ran a day of seminars and the one with parents was the busiest of the day, because the students were quite scared of what they would get into with parents. There is work to be done with teacher training. Parents need to be brought in to talk to the students so that they do not have that thought in their head when they become teachers. Parents are just as scared as teachers. As Eileen Prior said, we just want the best for our children. We need to emphasise to teachers that they should please tell us about the negatives as well as about the good things. That would make a huge difference to parental involvement.

The Convener: I think that parents would perhaps be more involved if parents nights did not start at 4 in the afternoon and finish at 6. That

makes it quite difficult for a lot of parents to get there at all. That is a personal bugbear of mine.

Chic Brodie: You say that something has to be done, and four words come to mind: leadership, community, identity and communication—Iain Ellis just referred to the last of those, and it must be communication not just of the positives. Underpinning those things, there is also all the training. Do we have the leadership among the schools or the parents to drive the agenda that we are looking at?

Eileen Prior: In some cases, yes. Some schools are doing great work and have the leadership; unfortunately, they are working on their own. For all that we talk about it, we do not do a good job of sharing what is working.

Chic Brodie: How could we share it?

Eileen Prior: It is the job of Education Scotland to capture the good stories and to share good practice. That is what Education Scotland is about. It is working at it, but it is still not very good at it.

There is some good leadership, but there is also some pretty rotten leadership, I am afraid, where parents feel excluded and the leadership of the school does not bring them in. I keep going back to the survey that the committee undertook, which showed that even parents who want to be involved and who actively turn up at meetings and so on do not feel that the communication is good enough. We have a long way to go—

Chic Brodie: Forgive me for interrupting. We talk about leadership and the dominance of the school, yet we are still trying to encourage parents to get involved. There must be leaders among the parents. I do not know whether Iain Ellis has a view on that.

Eileen Prior: There are—absolutely. I remember a colleague of mine having a conversation with Government officials about a particular piece of legislation. She said that if there was a lawyer on the parent council, they would run rings around it, and the response was, "Are there lawyers on parent councils?" Well, yes, there are, because the parents who attend parent councils are all sorts of things. There is a sense that people do not understand that the parent body has capacity as well. At the minute, the parents are passive recipients of information; they are not partners. The information is sent out to parents and they are supposed to consume it and respond. What we need is a partnership in which there is dialogue and exchange, and in which there are agreed outcomes, not simply parents being told what to do.

Chic Brodie: What about the identification aspect and building community feeling? I will come back to independent schools later, if I may.

The Convener: We will come to that. Dr Morton wants to respond to your first question.

Dr Morton: Your question was about how we share good practice. Education Scotland and the Scottish Government commissioned a review that is on a website called engagingwithfamilies.co.uk, which invites schools to add their examples of good practice. The last time I looked, that had not happened much—there may be some communication strategies around it. Part of it is a parental needs assessment sheet, which encourages schools to think about how they assess parental need. That was produced by Children in Scotland. There is also some guidance on thinking about community assets. There are some tools there for sharing and learning that schools do not know about.

Chic Brodie: Forgive me, but we have just heard that some parents and disadvantaged families do not have PCs or laptops—

Dr Morton: The website is for schools.

Chic Brodie: The point is that there may be leaders among that part of the community that we have not tapped into.

Dr Morton: On not having access to information technology, some schools are rolling out IT projects that give every child a device, and they have quite good evidence to show that that increases parental engagement particularly among families for whom that is the only way of accessing the internet. That approach is being used in quite a few areas at the moment.

11:00

Shona Crawford: Although I agree absolutely with Dr Morton on the advent of IT systems and how that can improve the sharing of practice, most of the headteachers I know get on to their computers and read their emails at night as they are having a cup of tea before going to bed. That is the first opportunity that they have to do it because the life of the school takes over.

We have to be realistic about what schools can achieve by accessing IT and putting good practice online. They would absolutely endorse that, but we have to consider the reality of time.

Iain Ellis: To be honest, the big issue is leadership. I can tell you different stories. One school had a tremendous parent council, which was really active, but the headteacher left, they got a new headteacher in and the parent council virtually finished. However, I have seen the situation the other way about, when a new headteacher has gone in and the parent council has flourished.

The key point is that there has to be a relationship between the parent council and the headteacher. The headteacher must want that relationship because it does not matter how many parents want it, if the leader of the school does not want it, parents will never crack it.

Chic Brodie: With all due respect, I repeat what I said: the leadership does not necessarily have to come from the school; it can come from within the community.

Eileen Prior: No, I totally disagree with that.

Iain Ellis: No, if the head does not want it, you will never get a partnership in the school. I would not say that it has to be led by the school, but it must be a partnership and, if the headteacher does not want it or puts obstacles in the parents' way, it does not matter how many of them want it, they will never crack it because they need the support.

The Convener: The centre for excellence for looked after children in Scotland, citing research by the United Kingdom Department for Education, says:

"Where there is effective parental involvement the single most important factor was found to be the enthusiasm of the headteacher."

I assume that you agree with that.

Eileen Prior: Absolutely.

Iain Ellis: Yes.

Jackie Tolland: It is about engaging with parents in the community. The relationship has to start somewhere and be built upon. It is a two-way process between the community and the schools, but it has to be a relationship and it must be equal. The issue is the imbalance in the power dynamic. If the headteacher is up for it, a way forward could be to turn the situation on its head, bring the headteacher out into the community groups and start to change the power dynamic.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Good morning. I have a couple of questions but, initially, I will focus on Iain Ellis's point about leadership and, in particular, getting good news and bad news at parents nights. My son had learning difficulties and I kept being told how nice a boy he was. I used to say, "I know that. He takes after his father." I was not there to find that out; I wanted to know how he was doing academically.

When we visited the Wester Hailes education centre, we heard that there was leadership from the headteacher there, who took the centre on. Things have improved, but they had to break things back down to basics: they had to teach teachers to teach pupils instead of process them. I found that interesting. We were talking about the

real world and could see how the success was happening. What are your views on that?

Eileen Prior: When teachers struggle to get their heads around what a young person can achieve and what they can say about them, they will focus on the personality and say that they are a very nice youngster. As you say, the response is, "Well, I know that." That is not an uncommon experience.

It comes back to how we talk about achievement and attainment, which Iain Ellis talked about. I agree that parents have pretty straightforward requirements from a school: they want their child to be happy, be looked after and do the best that they can. If that means that they achieve five highers and two advanced highers, that is great, but if it means that they turn up at school every day and are willing to learn, they participate in the school community and they get a few standard grades—I should say a few national 4s and 5s—parents will be happy with that. It is about being the best that they can be.

However, because schools see academic attainment as the standard by which they are measured, if a youngster is not going to achieve five highers and two advanced highers, schools struggle to say that, actually, they are doing really well, are doing the best that they can and will do brilliantly at certain things. We need to change the nature of the dialogue so that attainment is not everything and it is about wider achievement and participation in the school community.

Shona Crawford: I could not agree more. In many schools it is evident that they celebrate wider achievement. There are all sorts of outdoor activities, such as forest schools and nurture groups to meet the needs of the wide variety of children. The challenge for schools is to get parents to understand the benefits of all those activities, because some parents are still very focused on exam results. That is another barrier to the communication that we have talked about. I certainly agree with all the comments that building that relationship is crucial.

Iain Ellis: I agree with Shona Crawford. We talk about educating our children but, actually, we need to do a lot of work with parents. In fact, it is not just parents; I hate to say it, but we need to educate you guys—MSPs—ministers and local councillors to try to change the mindset so that it is not all about qualifications and we think about wider achievement.

When I spoke at the leadership events across the country, I said that it is great that kids are achieving, but we need to look at what they are achieving and whether, as Eileen Prior said, they are achieving the best that they can. For some children, getting an N1, 2, 3 or 4 is an

achievement. As Eileen Prior said, that achievement is the same as that of other children who get highers and advanced highers. We need to look at the wider picture.

We also need to educate parents. When I was at school, it was all about qualifications. One of my children has just gone through school and, obviously, I was concerned about what qualifications she would leave with. Somebody asked me when that mindset will change. We need to educate the parents and everybody else in the country, including employers, or things will change only when my daughter has a child going through school, because her experience is different. There is an awful lot of work to be done to educate other people, as well as our children in school.

Dr Morton: It is also about expectations. A really powerful thing that a teacher can do is to raise a parent's expectations of their child. Teachers have a sense of what they expect a child to do and, when they have low expectations, particularly for those who are least likely to attain well, that will just reinforce the parent's attitude. However, if the teacher says what they expect the child to do, that can start to pull in parent's expectations, and that is a really powerful combination.

Chic Brodie: I have a related question, which is on something that we discussed earlier and that is referred to in the NPFS submission. How much distortion does the focus on academic qualifications create in terms of parental involvement vis-à-vis vocational qualifications?

Eileen Prior: Sorry, but could you clarify the question?

Chic Brodie: We have heard for years that people have to go to university, university, university, and that creates a culture in which that is what we mean by attainment. However, in previous evidence sessions, we have talked about the fact that we need people who are not necessarily potential university students but who are very capable and who can make a greater contribution through the vocational route. How much does that distort the attainment spectrum?

Iain Ellis: I think it distorts it hugely. As I just said, we need to educate people. Kids out there are doing and achieving tremendous things, but they are not getting a qualification. I could tell you stories about what some authorities are doing. Some children out there are getting into college without the qualifications that they should need to get on to the course, because the authority has worked with the college and the children have moved on. There is more than one way to get into college or university.

It is all about education and we need to look at wider achievement. That is where insight comes in, but we need to score it properly.

The Convener: Okay. I get the point.

Eileen Prior: There is a generation of parents, of whom I am one, who have seen their youngsters going through school, aiming for highers, going to university, getting their degree and then there is nothing, or nothing of value. We have been sold a story about the golden ticket that is the degree, but it is not a golden ticket. There is a dialogue to be had about creating realistic expectations for young people and providing them with the support to do the best that they can to move in the career direction that they want to move in. Whether that is academic or vocational does not matter.

The most prized academic degrees are absolutely vocational: people become a doctor or a lawyer with them. If that is not vocational, what is? We have to change the narrative about vocational and academic.

George Adam: I want to ask about parents with greater needs. We have talked about them in some detail, but how do we get to them?

Some of the things that have been said so far are interesting. It is not all about school; it is also about the third sector and other organisations. I was interested in what Shona Crawford said about the fact that some schools access parents through plays, drama, culture or sport, for example. Jackie Tolland spoke about the fact that some parents come from difficult educational backgrounds.

In evidence that we received, the SPTC said:

"In many cases, the third sector and externally funded projects play a significant role in taking forward this work, rather than the school itself."

I would like to explore that more. Would it not be easier for parents who have emotional baggage from their time at school to access that type of thing as opposed to the school?

Shona Crawford: We have a very interesting project that is linked with Action for Children and is engaged in training parents to be buddies of other parents. Schools have asked Action for Children to link up some of the more needy parents or parents who have the most stresses in their lives with volunteer parents who can help them to do ordinary things that they perhaps lack the confidence to do, such as playing with their children, taking them to appointments, going into school and engaging in parenting opportunities. It is a very small project, but it has been a huge success for the parents who have volunteered, as many of them have gone on and got extra qualifications as a result of their volunteering, and it has allowed schools to find a way to bring in the

parents who are perhaps furthest from mainstream services.

Jackie Tolland: On labelling parents as needy or vulnerable, we can all be needy and vulnerable at any point in our life. Our whole ethos is parents for parents, so that there is a bit of equality and when people come along to an organisation or a group, they know that although other parents might be further down the road, that is because they have already had some training—they know that it is a journey. At the end of it, ultimately the parent wants the confidence to be the best parent that they can be for their child. That is what draws people to organisations that support them. They know that they need it and that they are vulnerable.

I talked to someone the other day about areas of multiple deprivation. Kids can grow up hearing that about the place that they live in. I was brought up in Drumchapel and I did not know that I was living in an area of multiple deprivation and I had a great childhood, but if people hear that story and those labels, they will grow up with that mindset. We really could change that.

George Adam: I agree with Jackie Tolland—the labels that we use are important. A child from Ferguslie park in my constituency does not grow up thinking that they are in an area of deprivation. It is important that we are very careful in how we use those labels.

11:15

Jackie Tolland: It is the areas that have challenges; the people just happen to live there. It is the structural stuff that has to change.

George Adam: Yes, we need to get that right.

Eileen Prior: Can I come in on that point?

The Convener: We are really pressed for time, I am afraid.

Chic Brodie: Just briefly, on the independent schools and the so-called contract with parents, is there any point, possibility or benefit in replicating that contract in state schools?

Dr Morton: There is something to be said about how we raise parents' expectations around engagement. We have focused quite a lot on the schools and on what they can do. The community group is one way to get parents involved. However, there might be something more to do population-wide, along the lines of saying, "Well, actually, you should be involved." The norm should be that parents are involved.

The thing that we come up against again and again is that when we provide those opportunities, the people who are interested come and that is seen as good enough. It is about trying to raise

parents' expectations about what involvement might look like from their point of view and about the sorts of things that help in the home environment around learning and learning support. It might also be about trying to change people's minds in the population in general.

Shona Crawford: I certainly agree with that. I was hoping that some sort of expectation would be built into the increase in hours for the early years. I know that a lot of that increase is about enabling parents to get off to work, but many of our parents are not in work. I would like to see an expectation that they will become involved with their child in nursery. Yes, engage and yes, have the extra hours but parents should come in and join the nursery staff in engaging with their children when they start that learning journey so that we can address that attainment gap, which we know starts in the early years.

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am quite interested in the legislative changes that have happened due to the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006. A number of submissions gave a mixed review of the act, if we are being polite about it. Renfrewshire Council said that it had

"no evidence that parental involvement alone raises attainment",

which therefore speaks to the act. The Poverty Alliance reported mixed views but highlighted one comment that

"the Parental Involvement Act has actually widened inequalities as more confident parents took control while others were pushed to the side."

The SPTC said in its submission:

"In our experience, the level of support being provided at local authority level to parents and parent groups—through Parent Officers and similar—has declined significantly over the years since the Parental Involvement legislation was enacted."

Can I get your views on those comments before we take the discussion further?

Eileen Prior: I certainly endorse that. Audit Scotland has produced figures and the number of parental involvement officers has diminished significantly over the years, as well as the amount of time that they have to support parents and parent groups. There is no evidence about the impact of the legislation. That is a big want at the minute. Some research needs to be done to see what change the legislation has made.

We work with parent councils and parent groups up and down the country. We have people out most nights of the week during term-time working with parent councils. We ask them, "How do you represent all your parents?" and "How do you communicate with and involve all your parents?" That does not mean having them all round the

table, because that is not practical. It is about asking how they do those things as a parent group. Those are the two big challenges that parent councils have and, as an organisation, we are the only folk—other than the one or two parent officers out there—who are helping them to do that.

Siobhan McMahon: But why is that declining? In your evidence, you said that it had gone backwards since the act came into force rather than the opposite, which in 2006 you would probably have thought would happen.

Eileen Prior: Do you mean the level of involvement from parent officers?

Siobhan McMahon: Yes.

Eileen Prior: That is quite simply because local authority budgets have been squeezed and people have been removed from posts or have been given lots of additional duties. People might hold the title "parental involvement officer", but they also deal with home schooling, complaints, consultations and 101 other things. The amount of time that those officers have to support parents and parent groups has shrunk to the point at which it is almost negligible in some cases.

Siobhan McMahon: How representative are parent councils? Iain, you said that, in order for the ethos to work in the school, the headteacher has to be directly involved, regardless of the will of parents. Do you find—from anecdotal evidence or otherwise—that the dozen parents, say, who sit on the parent council do the work, while the rest of them can just sit back and watch it happening? How do the parents concerned get involved?

Iain Ellis: It varies so much across the country. It comes down to relationships and how much the parent council wants to do. Parent councils are different. The members of some of them just want to go along and listen to what the headteacher has to say. Other parent councils will want to look at the improvement plan or development plan for the school and decide how to take it forward and how to get other parents involved.

I totally agree with what Eileen Prior has said about parental involvement officers in authorities. They are very few and far between now. Some of the submissions mentioned 40 per cent as the proportion of the person's time spent on parental involvement, but I think that people in some areas are lucky if the officer spends 10 per cent of their time on it.

Dundee City Council has a dedicated parental involvement officer, and she is very active. There are some really good things going on in Dundee. We talk to directors and ask why that cannot be replicated across the country. As Eileen Prior said,

it is all about budgeting and money. Councils cannot afford it.

If some of the reports that parental involvement can help to raise attainment are true—I personally think that it can—and if councils are serious about parental involvement, they need to do more about it locally, that is, authority-wide.

Siobhan McMahon: We had a discussion earlier about those parents who are more active in certain areas—I am referring to the middle classes and various other things. Perhaps this view is not borne out by any evidence, but the people on parent councils are those who have confidence. They are in certain positions in their working lives, and they think that they can articulate messages and get involved. Those parents who did not have good schooling and do not have that experience sit back and do not think that they can become involved. Is it fair to say that?

Iain Ellis: Yes and no. There are some schools in highly deprived areas where the work done by parent councils is spectacular and puts a lot of schools with well-to-do parents to shame.

Siobhan McMahon: Let us take a school in a deprived area—the school that I went to would probably be in that category. The parent council will be made up of parents who are not necessarily from a deprived background themselves. The parent council might be working in a deprived school, but are the parents—

Iain Ellis: Yes, I am talking about parents who come from—

Siobhan McMahon: Right—okay.

Eileen Prior: It comes down to leadership.

The Convener: I am sorry, Eileen, but Jackie Tolland wants to come in.

Jackie Tolland: The parents who are involved in parent-teacher councils will already be engaged, and they are in the community. The point is to build a bridge and to prepare people for the transition into a parent council. That is where we could focus. It is matter of building confidence.

If a parent is not engaged in the school, they do not know how to take that step to the parent-teacher council. It all comes back to confidence, changing people's mindset, opening the door and changing the power dynamic. It has always been a matter of people going into the school, but there has to be a wee bit coming the other way, showing that it is a two-way process. We could try that.

Siobhan McMahon: Is legislation needed to close the attainment gap?

Eileen Prior: It is very interesting to see that the attainment gap features in the Education (Scotland) Bill, which has come to the committee

recently. As ever, the devil will be in the detail, but I would like the guidance that will sit behind the bill to put the onus on local authorities to use commonly shared evidence-based practice to achieve some consistency of approach across local authorities, as we have discussed.

We do not need more initiatives. In Scottish education, we are initiated out, so let us apply consistently what is happening, what is good and what we know works, rather than have 32 local authorities all going off in different directions doing different things.

Liam McArthur: Dr Morton's body language in response to the question whether we need legislation to close the attainment gap was eloquent.

I am struck that, over the past hour and a half, we have been slightly schizophrenic in our discussion of raising attainment and closing the attainment gap, which are clearly two separate things. I am also struck that that schizophrenia is not limited to the committee: the policy memorandum to the Education (Scotland) Bill, which we will consider shortly, talks of the Government's

“commitment ... to help make Scotland a fairer, more equal place”

through improvement of

“education and attainment for all”,

while the long title of the bill talks about the Scottish Parliament imposing

“duties in relation to reducing pupils' inequalities of outcome”.

Are we in danger of getting drawn into aspiring to make everybody above average or drawn into some kind of trickle-down attainment economics whereby focusing on raising attainment for everyone will benefit those who are most in need? I notice that, in keeping with his attempt to be controversial, Iain Ellis said in his submission that he agreed

“with Audit Scotland's view that spending should be targeted on the parents, pupils and schools that need it the most. The focus should not be on raising attainment for all, as this will continue to raise the bar while not addressing the equity gap”.

Are we in danger of spreading ourselves across two almost contradictory objectives?

Dr Morton: This is more a reflection than explicit in the evidence, but it seems that there is some really good practice in targeted schools that are in areas that have a higher level of need where the staff have to get out of the door and work really hard to involve parents.

I suspect that some of the risk is more in the big-mix schools, where it is easy to get some

parents in the door but there will always be a cohort that never appears. Those schools can say, "Oh look, we've got 75 per cent of the parents coming to parents evening," but the 25 per cent who do not come are those who would probably benefit the most from some interaction.

The two aims are not completely mutually exclusive. Iain Ellis mentioned that some middle-class parent councils are doing really badly. They are probably also in those really mixed schools, because it is easy for the middle-class parents to be on the parent council and they do not feel that they have a duty to try to involve everybody.

Perhaps we need a nuanced approach. We know that parental engagement will benefit every child, so we should think about it across the piece. However, there will need to be some targeting that will suit different kinds of schools in different ways.

Liam McArthur: Shona Crawford talked about the time and financial resources that could be involved in helping to support looked-after children, as Eileen Prior mentioned, or others who might need additional support. If we prioritise everything, nothing is a priority. Should we be more ruthless and say that, although a measure would benefit the school environment as a whole, the priority on which we should focus is trying to address the gap rather than simply attainment as a whole?

Shona Crawford: If we want to close the attainment gap, we have to target resources at our lowest-performing 20 per cent. However, anything that we do with those children to develop teacher skill in building relationships with families or in the methodology and pedagogy in schools will benefit all.

We need to think clearly about what the evidence says. There are a number of evidence-based programmes around but they are costly and we need to target resources if we want to close the gap.

11:30

Eileen Prior: But we also have to bear in mind the programme for international student assessment study, which shows that the biggest difference is within, not between schools in Scotland. You cannot say, "We'll target this school, but not that one", because there are massive differences within individual schools and in the parent population and the families involved with them. My sense is that we have to start with a universal approach but be prepared to put in additional funding for specific projects or programmes that meet a clearly identified need.

Liam McArthur: I should make it clear that I acknowledge that the gap is as much in as

between schools. However—and we see this in the committee's survey—if you do not prioritise, the danger is that a self-selecting group will say, "Engagement with parents is not great—and we want more" and you will get sidetracked into dealing with that instead of dealing with the more fundamental problem that Eileen Prior identified at the beginning of how we hear from the parents that we need to hear from most and who probably need the most support. Is that a fair comment?

Eileen Prior: Yes.

The Convener: What about the Scottish Government's recently announced £100 million attainment fund, which, from memory, is being targeted at seven local authorities? Is that the sort of thing that should be done, or do we need to do more than that?

Eileen Prior: I hope that some of that money will find its way into programmes with a specific focus on parental engagement with schools.

The Convener: But my point is that the fund does not apply to every school in every authority. It is specific to those areas where there is least advantage, if you want to put it that way.

Iain Ellis: What will that money be used for? Any bit of money for helping education is superb, but does the Government know what that £100 million—or what is at the moment £20 million to be shared among seven local authorities—will be used for? Should we not first and foremost have done a wee bit of work to find out what that money will be used for? We can all share examples of good practice or pilot projects that have made a huge difference but which are not sustainable across the country. If the resources are put in, we can do this, but my question back to Liam McArthur is: what gap are we closing, and what are we measuring to close it? As I have already asked, what are we going to measure with regard to attainment? Indeed, what is attainment? We need to find out what gap we are trying to close. Are we trying to close the qualifications gap? I do not know—and I am a parent and the chair of a national parents body. We do not know what gap we are trying to close; all we hear is, "We want to close the attainment gap", but what are we talking about when we talk about "attainment"? We need to clarify what we mean by attainment, and then work out how we close the gap.

Liam McArthur: There is a general acceptance that a wider perspective on achievement is certainly desirable, but it has also been recognised that there is a gap that is being borne out in life outcomes with regard to positive destinations post school, whether that be further training at college, job experience or whatever. That is the gap that we are trying to address, instead of getting

everyone to aspire to five highers, which I do not think anyone is arguing for.

Iain Ellis: I want to come back on the point about positive achievement—

The Convener: Please be quick.

Iain Ellis: I will be, convener. The issue is how we record things. For example, a child who attends college for half a day a week is recorded as having achieved a positive destination. However, I do not consider that to be a positive destination, and we need to look at what we are actually recording.

Liam McArthur: I do not dispute that.

The attainment fund, which the convener mentioned, is being targeted at seven different areas, but there are pockets of poverty and attainment gaps in the other 25 local authority areas. Are we in danger of saying, “This, by our measure of multiple deprivation, looks like a sensible policy”, when, in fact, we are not going to be able to make the headway that we need to make with individual children? After all, I think that Universities Scotland has pointed out that 70 per cent of those who live in the poorest households do not fall within the Scottish index of multiple deprivation 20 measure. Is it fair to say that we have spent quite a bit of money on not targeting this in an appropriate way?

Eileen Prior: I am concerned that that is true.

The Convener: On behalf of the committee, I thank the witnesses for their attendance. We have spent just over an hour and a half on the matter, so we have had a reasonable crack at it, and I very much appreciate your coming along and giving your time this morning. Obviously we are in the middle of this inquiry on the attainment gap—whatever the attainment gap might be, Mr Ellis—and we are endeavouring to look at the issue and come up with some suggestions on how to resolve it.

As the committee has agreed to hold the next items in private, I now close the meeting to the public. However, before I do so, I should for the sake of clarity point out that Mark Griffin, as member in charge of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill, will not take part in the discussion under item 5, which is consideration of the approach to our stage 1 report on the bill. However, he will take part in the other items that are to be taken in private.

11:35

Meeting continued in private until 12:26.

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