

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Scottish Attainment Challenge inquiry

Informal engagement with teachers

Online

Monday 9 May 2022

Note of meeting

Purpose of the session

This engagement session was arranged to allow Committee members to hear directly from teachers about their experiences of the Scottish Attainment Challenge. The event was organised in conjunction with the EIS.

The Committee agreed to take evidence from case-study local authority areas involving witnesses from primary schools, secondary schools, and local authority representatives from the selected areas.

The Scottish Attainment Challenge is intended to provide significant autonomy to local authorities and schools and there will be a multitude of approaches within localities. Local authorities are grouped regionally in 'Regional Improvement Collaboratives' (RIC). Scrutiny of the Scottish Attainment Challenge at the level of a RIC will allow the Committee to compare different local authorities and how they work together and with Education Scotland.

The Committee agreed that the West Partnership RIC, which consists of eight local authorities across the west of Scotland: East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Glasgow City, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire, and West Dunbartonshire, form the case study area for this inquiry. Thirty-five percent of Scotland's school population attend a West Partnership school. There are over 1000 nurseries, primary, secondary and special schools in the West Partnership, serving mainly urban but also many rural communities.

The teachers attending this event are from schools within the West Partnership Area.

Notes of meetings

The teachers were split into two groups and notes were taken of each discussion. These notes are attached in the annexe.

Annexe: Notes of discussions

Group 1: Primary school teachers

Stephen Kerr MSP (Convener) and Committee members Ruth Maguire MSP and Michael Marra MSP were joined in this group by five primary school teachers from within the West Partnership.

What has worked well?

Supporting different needs

There was a headteacher in the group; their school community has 99% from a visible ethnic minority group and 85% speak English as an additional language. Many challenges come from outside the school and the sizeable funds provided through the attainment challenge have given them freedom to seek to address them (again, the measures funded are additional to core functions). Through this process, the headteacher has the freedom to understand the needs of the community; however, they said that a narrative that 'pushes a consistent single approach' is unhelpful. Having freedom and empowerment to meet the needs of local community is one of the 'wonderful' things that has come about from the attainment funding.

With the funding, their school has:

- run family learning projects;
- taken on additional teachers;
- taken on additional support for learning staff, 'which is invaluable';
- reduced class sizes: in primary one there are twelve pupils in each class and this has worked 'unbelievably well' in raising attainment.

The school is also looking at providing support for children with different neurodiversities; the freedom the funding gives them is empowering and they want to take the time to understand what their community needs to raise attainment.

Teachers and learning support

One teacher said that additionality and extra teachers to provide targeted support has been the main focus for attainment funding in their school. They have run targeted intervention groups and employed staff to run them on a full-time basis (e.g. for literacy and numeracy).

One headteacher told Members that extra teachers are the 'best resource you can ever have for raising attainment'. They have very small primary one classes (three teachers work across two classes); the difference this has made has been 'phenomenal'. Some children will not attain to the expected level but the increase in levels of attainment with an extra person working with them and their parents is 'amazing'.

Their school did lots of family engagement and provided protected support for learning time, focused on numeracy and literacy and health and wellbeing interventions; this has made a 'big difference'.

The pandemic accelerated the digital curriculum and the school obtained the hardware it needed which was helpful. In relation to the staffing element, one headteacher has already made PEF bids for their school for the next academic year. The local authority matches this funding which means that the school gets 'two teachers for the cost of one and a half'. This allows the school to have smaller classes and to put interventions in place, such as engaging with parents and the community.

One headteacher said that some pupils need a specialised approach and timetable; they need a very different way of managing the curriculum and learning and parents need that support too.

They also ran a small nurture group and have nurture spaces all over the school. Other specific interventions included a number box and catch up on numeracy and purchasing age appropriate reading books for older children who are struggling with their reading, which is a dignity issue.

Engaging parents

Parental engagement is also key, parents may have had a different experience of school and there is a need to educate them on the curriculum, in order to engage them with the system.

One headteacher spoke of a 'fantastic' 98% turnout at literacy events for parents; they ran evening sessions too. One teacher said that holding events for parents outside the classroom was effective as coming into the classroom can be off-putting. Their school ran afterschool programmes and got parents in to run some clubs which involved a team teaching approach; this built confidence and took them out of the formal classroom environment.

Another teacher said that actively listening to parents and taking their needs seriously is important, 'sometimes you have to go out into the community to reach people'.

One teacher explained that they were taken out of class for attainment challenge work; they were a 'protected teacher' working on attainment and led project work, including organising literacy and numeracy support for parents. They organised a 'really successful' film literacy club for parents; it is sometimes challenging to get parents into schools and being able to work on literacy skills with them through film was 'fun and relaxed'. This was only possible through attainment challenge funding and having the extra teacher whose sole purpose was to focus on such projects. The funding was there to sustain the project throughout the year. Parents were then able to take those skills back home; the teacher said that this represents additionality and is an example of a 'great thing' that only happened thanks to the protected funding.

For the school in question, this funding will be sustained throughout the coming year and has gone up slightly; this means that there will be a teacher out of class full-time to focus on a specific need in the school relating to raising attainment (such as working directly with parents).

One school organised 'stay and play' sessions; these are targeted workshops which involve invitations to a small group of parents to work with a teacher and children where magnetic board and letters are provided for every child to take home.

The pandemic interfered with a lot of work, especially family engagement initiatives such as 'biscuit and blether' and 'stay and play' sessions, but there are plans to bring them back after the summer holidays.

Partnership working

One teacher from Inverclyde worked in an attainment challenge pilot school where over 90% of the pupils are from within SIMD 1 and 2. They said that the attainment challenge has provided additionality as the funding is ringfenced for the purpose of reducing the attainment gap. They have been involved in partnership working with Barnardo's, educational psychologists, mental health workers and others within the third sector. The teacher said they were always aware that the funding would come to an end and that the additionality had to be sustainable and be embedded, including resources that wouldn't go out of date.

They have used the funds to employ teachers but they also seconded teachers out to provide coaching on literacy and numeracy as well as wellbeing and health. All schools in the area have a nurturing ethos; if a school gets the development ethos right, attainment grows from that.

With the different types of children in the school, they are looking at what children need beyond formal education. They have spent some of the funds on arts and engaged with creative agencies in partnership working; attainment challenge funding has given them freedom to engage with such wider projects.

Another headteacher spoke of a universal offering that was available from the local authority (which was an attainment challenge authority) through training, etc.

Health and wellbeing

One school invested in counselling for primary six and sevens which provided one to one sessions; one child who had emotional difficulties 'really came on' as a result of that intervention and it was helpful to others too.

One school has arranged Sparks counselling sessions, specifically for children around transitions.

Measuring the impact of funding

One teacher said that there is value in looking beyond attainment figures to measure the impact of the funding. There were doubts about how accurate the figures are and how they translate into tables and data. Outcomes are very difficult to measure. Factors such as health and wellbeing and attitudes to learning are also important; 'if children don't feel happy and secure and valued they'll never achieve and attain'. For one school, the first part of their PEF spend was all about getting children to the point where they feel good about themselves and have the right mindset to learn. These are interventions which are difficult to measure; people – especially the media – treating data like league tables can be very frustrating for schools, especially as

some of the interventions can take a long time to embed and show results. 'We have to measure what we value not value what we measure'.

One headteacher said that they are working hard to get the data right and a lot of their data is going into other authorities; the focus has to be on the quality of teaching and learning.

Impact of changes to the funding arrangements

One teacher worked for a challenge local authority where £3.4 million funding was being reduced to £600K due to the change in funding arrangements; a 78% cut. The teacher said that teachers are 'raging' about these cuts. One school now has a four year plan to reintroduce teachers who have been seconded elsewhere in the local authority area to fulfil 'coaching and modelling officer' roles. The return of these staff to their substantive posts means that staff who have backfilled will not be able to keep their jobs. These posts were not core and are all temporary. Coaching and modelling officer secondments will not happen anymore and these posts will no longer be available. Initiatives such as these bring 'real sustainable change'.

What could be improved?

Policy

One headteacher said that the 'dedicated money' within the attainment challenge is 'tied to a central narrative'; they prefer the monies they are free to spend and don't enjoy the 'disempowering' impact of this aspect SAC funding.

When pursuing attainment, one headteacher explained, community ethnic groups and additional learning needs can be problematised, i.e. they are made out to be a problem when this is not the case. The headteacher said that there is an ethical question around who gets left out. Children who are 'nearly attaining' are pushed and targeted but 'what about children who aren't attaining?' This was being explored but then this work stopped. This headteacher carried out a Turkish pupil's assessment in Turkish and they 'smashed it'; the problem was not attainment but language. However, where these issues are not acknowledged, the difficulties are sustained and these children can be treated as a 'problem'. The headteacher said that it is 'naïve' to say that a consistent approach for all children is needed; it should be tailored. They said that the language used around attainment can be 'discriminatory'.

One teacher said that there is still 'confusion within the system and a lack of clarity around what we want from our children'. The teacher described a 'production line' where literacy and maths are key, but said that experiences are more important for some pupils. The teacher said that PEF should be focused more around providing the experiences families will not get anywhere else. Others in the group agreed. They said that a lot of PEF funding is used to plug gaps, such as buying maths or reading resources; they think this should be done using core funds.

Another teacher agreed that the poverty related attainment gap is about creating the rounded citizen not just about maths and literacy. For example, they said that having a different language is an asset; 'why can't we work in a way that celebrates that and learn how to work with these assets?'

The focus of their school has been on those children who are 'almost there' and not on those children who are far from reaching attainment levels. The teacher said that there is a gap here.

One of the headteachers present said that some of the research that policy is built around is flawed; for example it is not disaggregated for ethnicity, etc. There is also research that found there's little value from support for learning staff. Members were told that these are women who are poorly paid and often have to work other jobs to supplement their income; 'we couldn't run our school without our support for learning workers', especially, in one case, those who speak Urdu. The headteacher described some of the theory put forward as a good use of PEF funding as 'flawed and unethical'. Another teacher said that support staff are in low paid temporary contracts which are not enticing; 'there's no security in them'.

One headteacher said that there is not enough creativity; they are seeking an 'impolite discussion' around management structures with those making the policy.

Funding

A teacher from Inverclyde said that cancelling the 78% cut to funding would help; they believe that the additional funding should be made permanent. They spoke about generational change which cannot happen in only five years. There is a need to tackle poverty – e.g. through health services and social security – as well as interventions in schools such as class size reduction and measures to increase attendance, which leads to more opportunity for teaching and learning to happen.

Another teacher agreed that funding needs to be permanent so that schools can put interventions into place and measure the pupil's journey from primary one throughout primary school; year on year progress is 'really difficult to track and measure'.

Members were told that the temporary nature of the funding is the biggest issue; there is a need for more emotional and social support. One teacher said that there is a focus on where schools can make a difference, but this means that a lot of schools are not targeting children where they can't make a difference.

One teacher said that the school has two probationers this year but doesn't have confirmed staffing for next year so there is uncertainty there. They spoke of trying to create an ethos around raising attainment in the school but this is a challenge when there is uncertainty around funding for the future.

In some cases additional teachers provided through the attainment challenge are being used to plug gaps in staffing.

Support for learning

One teacher of a primary seven class does not have a full-time support for learning staff member in the classroom. They said that support for learning staff are 'the first thing to be pulled from your class to cover for absence'. For some pupils, who are not expected to reach expected levels of attainment before moving onto high school, the focus has been more on developing other skills they will need going into high school.

One teacher said that they only have a person in their classroom once a week for additional support in their class and that has been 'pulled' when there are staffing difficulties across the school with nothing to replace that. This is a common issue; members of the group agreed that support staff 'carry the school' and are frustrated when they are not able to do the work they are employed to do. They said that it is difficult to plan around the inconsistencies in staffing when there are not enough people to fill gaps. This situation got worse during the pandemic but it's not a new problem; 'support staff are always stretched'.

There is no guarantee that a class will get that consistent support throughout their time in school. For example, one teacher spoke of a primary five class being allocated support due to challenges; that class will still need the support when they move to primary six but the resource might be allocated to the new intake in primary one.

Group 2: secondary teachers

This group was led by Kaukab Stewart MSP (Deputy Convener) with Stephanie Callaghan MSP, Graeme Dey MSP and Willie Rennie MSP also participating.

What is working well?

One teacher said a good thing from PEF/SAC allocation had been the upskilling / increase of technological resources for use at home. It has made a huge difference as most of the young people can be included, and not feel isolated. This has been particularly important over the last few years. Although multiple teachers noted that an internet connection was a problem for some young people and they were reliant on dongles. One teacher highlighted that improving access to broadband is critical so that young people don't have to rely on a dongle.

It was also noted that certain subjects need more powerful machines than chromebooks. The technical software required by some subjects isn't compatible with chromebooks so it is important that the right apparatus goes to the right person / subject / circumstances, which was echoed by other teachers.

Another teacher expressed concern that young people are too used to working on screens and are losing ability to write with pens / pencils. They also said that, in their experience, chromebooks were better than tablets.

One teacher said that it was important to acknowledge that poverty is the problem. Schools try to ameliorate the impact of poverty but the fundamental issue is poverty, which needs to be resolved. They praised the Scottish Government for acknowledging that.

All of the teachers welcomed PEF/SAC funding.

Several teachers agreed that there was a problem with short termism with PEF money. One said that they understood why this has been the case, but that it hasn't allowed schools to plan for longer term projects / interventions. The change to the longer-term funding commitment was therefore welcomed.

Another teacher agreed with the issues of short-termism and added that, initially, people were unsure about what worked, and how to make an impact in a short period of time.

Some things have worked:

- breakfast clubs were so useful;
- pastoral supports, including things such as uniform banks as they helped to improve the confidence of young people.

However, teachers said that they can't be sure how such interventions impacted on attainment, in terms of a defined measurement.

Another positive of the SAC was a definite increase in staff awareness of the impact of poverty.

One teacher said that they were worried about not making interventions early enough and suggested that more PEF funding should maybe be going to Primary. Secondary schools are seeing [large] gaps in attainment, it would be better to stop these gaps from getting that big in the first place. They also commented that lots of people talk about the gap without realising / being clear on how big the gap is.

Covid has had an impact – attendance down as anxiety / mental health issues have had an effect. It was commented that some gaps because of attendance are incredible. How can you pull that back / encourage more attendance? It is really difficult.

Several teachers agreed that, at first, PEF appointments were temporary with the scope to achieve limited by the fact that recruitment timescales reduced the length of a contract, and the process then repeated each year.

One teacher commented that they used to think that the classroom was the most important place for learning – but now they think it's the cafeteria. A tablet / device is less use than a full stomach. More books, more staff won't cut it to make a difference if the pupils aren't properly fed. They also highlighted the importance of having staff in the school who can help families access financial support / entitlements.

Another said that, pre-covid, one of the best things that PEF could do was to buy time for staff. Giving them time to phone home to check on children who aren't attending as they had lost their attendance officers years before. Post-covid, it feels like going backwards as anxiety levels are higher, and some young people don't see the point / benefit of education.

IT was great at the time [during lockdown], but the lockdowns have impacted on the ability of young people to focus.

One teacher said that the funding was welcomed and needed as funding is limited from elsewhere. Another positive is the autonomy given to schools to choose what to spend on, and their ability to target the resource at specific pupils who need support. It also allows people to move on from being unpromoted teachers with more responsibility, without jumping up to a faculty head etc.

They said, however, that while there are improvements and roles are created, a lot of PEF programmes are reliant on volunteers. Although funding isn't meant to be plugging gaps, it is having to do that as money is so tight, and funding isn't coming from elsewhere. Inequality is worse, so money is being used to fund essentials.

How is the impact of funding being measured?

One teacher commented that the most effective way to determine if an intervention is working is if it has increased attendance, and increased engagement. They cited simple interventions such as providing stationery for young people has made a difference to attendance / engagement.

Being able to take young people out of school has encouraged more engagement in school for many, although they noted that there are always some young people who show up for a visit but then still don't come in on regular school days.

Schools are looking at ways of engaging better with parents / carers who didn't have a good experience at school themselves so don't show up to parents' nights etc.

One teacher commented that, while welcome and a lot of money to be able to spend, it is not that much money in the grand scheme of Government spending, but accepting that it is a lot of money, appreciates that schools need to be accountable for it.

Measuring the impact of interventions can be really tricky. Insight data / SNSA tests can show hard data but you can't replicate a fantastic teacher. As the inputs aren't machine tooled, it is difficult to determine how much each one is contributing to attainment, and to the progress of pupils.

They agreed that attendance is a 'nightmare', and in terms of engagement with the school day, something has been lost over Covid. Government / Parliament likes things to be simple and measurable, but it isn't always that simple to quantify.

Another said that it was tricky to measure as you can't say if you give me £x then I can guarantee that it will lead to Y results.

One teacher said that they were a fan of Curriculum for Excellence when it came in but were of the view that SQA has destroyed CfE from 2018 – onwards. They stated that the change, in 2018, to lengthen Nat 5 exams meant that there is a cliff edge between Nat 4 and Nat 5. The cliff edge is 'horrendous' and it most affects / disadvantages lower SIMD students. In their view, the attainment gap grew because of this change.

How involved are teachers in deciding what to spend the money on / setting the PEF strategic direction?

One teacher who had a PEF role said that it was initially 3 months, then 6 months. They have set up a mentoring programme, targeting pupils to see a specific teacher each week. However, all mentors are volunteering. Their funded post is for 2 periods a week to deliver the programme, on top of their normal timetable.

They are looking to providing support / other forms of achievement for young people struggling to re-engage.

One teacher highlighted that, in their school, which has a diverse population, with a lot of eastern European pupils, teachers look to support / develop those pupils, to encourage them into the school. They have developed new courses to provide skills / experience for those pupils who were struggling to engage.

One teacher said that, initially, their headteacher didn't really know that to do with PEF. As such, class teachers were invited to participate in a PEF group, and asked

for ideas for what the school could spend the money on. Staff disengaged when PEF staff were brought in. There has been re-engagement of late, with the headteacher looking again for the views of staff. So their experience was good engagement, which fell away and is now being clawed back.

Another teacher agreed that engagement with class teachers was the initial approach in their school – but it never worked. Engagement of all staff was limited, it completely depended on the management style.

Another teacher said that Principal Teachers create the ideas. It was hard enough working with one PT, to help deliver their vision on top of your workload but to get another three or four PTs, it generates even more workload. They said that class teachers are being stretched, to create space for PEF or promoted staff to get time to do their stuff.

Willie Rennie asked if their roles have changed since PEF / SAC came in, given that teachers were always focused on raising attainment?

One responded to say that, as a result of PEF /SAC, staff were asked to ‘invent’ projects/ interventions which they felt would be impactful. They needed a timeline, pricing, etc.

They said that initially they interviewed for staff, and candidates who were successful were appointed / funded. However, they think and hope that their subsequent experience, over the last few years, has led teachers to be better at designing interventions which are also easier to track impact.

Teachers have got cleverer to not just giving a post to someone with an idea that would make the pupils happy; ‘we are smarter now about how we spend the money’.

Another teacher said— “I’m not different in my classroom but I am better at tracking young people who need some additional support.”

Another agreed that it is easier to be aware of those who need more support but that there are more challenges now, for example SQA / cuts to LA budgets / staff health and wellbeing – which are all having a negative impact.

Several teachers agreed that a reduction in class sizes would have a huge, positive impact on young people who are coming back from isolation.

Graeme Dey asked how do we measure progress rather than attainment?

One teacher responded by saying that they didn’t know but having pupils who are attending more / engaging more will help in itself and they are hopeful that it will lead to progress and more attainment.

Another added that engagement with pupils, and between pupils, is something that teachers are more aware of / keeping an eye on. Also noting who is attending after school clubs etc, is a way of seeing who is (going to) engage.

They said that the biggest problem is space for a small group of young people to meet together with a teacher as most teachers don't have a class of their own.

Another teacher said that in their context, the staff are 'superb' at focussing on those pupils who are less engaged / poor attenders/ school phobic. It's the great mass of pupils who attend every day but are not 'able and gifted' who it is most difficult to intervene with. Those who struggle are easily defined.