

## **EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE**

### **Attainment and achievement of school aged children experiencing poverty**

#### **Informal discussion group**

**Wednesday 25 April 2018**

The Committee held an informal meeting prior to its Committee meeting on 25 April 2018. The Committee invited the organisations giving evidence to the Committee to bring along individuals who work on the front-line, teachers, parents and young people to share their experiences with the Committee. In addition, the Committee spoke with two MSYPs.

The informal meeting split into two groups: one with individuals who attended with the Prince's Trust and John Loughton and another which included individuals from EIS, Connect, The Spark, and two MYSs.

#### **Group 1, Prince's Trust & John Loughton**

This conversation in this group was led by the Convener, James Dornan, Liz Smith, Richard Lochhead, Tavish Scott, Oliver Mundell and Johann Lamont.

##### *Achieve programme*

The Prince's Trust explained that it has 15 years' experience working in schools. Its current [Achieve programme](#) works with young people to build resilience, soft skills, confidence and helps to overcome barriers such as addictions.

Young people are taken out of the classroom to work with either youth workers or specific teaching staff who have been trained on the Achieve programme. The programme is based on a community learning approach and allows the young people to experience outbound activities and work experience; this helps to build the young people's self-esteem and in turn enables them to make informed choices on their routes.

A teacher and two young people who are in the Achieve programme attended the meetings and the teacher told Members that "pupils flourish on the programme, those who were not engaging with their learning go onto better engagement and increased confidence."

The young people said they spend around 3 hours per week on the programme. They enjoy the programme and their confidence has improved. One said it was a relief from other subjects at school. The teacher agreed that for some the programme was 'a breathing space' and having that space helped build up the young people who could then better approach the other topics at school.

The teacher also described how activities are co-produced with the participants and have a focus on collaborative, relevant and varied activities which suit the young people. She also described how she stopped being a teacher in this 'class' and more of a co-ordinator – the relationships with young people was built on mutual trust and respect. She also gave examples of where her Achieve group supported each other emotionally. Both the young people and the teacher explained that some in the school saw Achieve group negatively (both pupils and teachers), but this was not something that concerned them.

The teacher in the group mentioned that the schools are being approached more often by employers about partnerships which gave opportunities for work experience within the school term. This was considered to be positive as it helped develop practical skills and maintained the link to schools.

### *Youth work*

Youth work was considered to be good in itself and a key part of education for many. Young people most in need can find solace in it and positive adult relationships that they may not have at home. It was also felt that youth work often works better because it is not school and is not as rules-based as formal education. Having a youth worker / community learning worker in school was also discussed and felt to be important to provide a different dynamic. Particularly youth workers can sometimes be better at building trust and approaching young people as equals.

John Loughton discussed his Scran Academy project and gave an example of a young person who had low attendance at school working on the project and thereby gaining skills. The individual also learned to trust others and the youth worker and the fact that this happened out with school helped this and the project helped to support them to re-engage with school-based education. The pupil's attendance at school increased notably.

The group discussed what works well to improve the attainment and achievement of young people who experience poverty. Some examples were—

- Having youth workers in school;
- Being able to have a hybrid timetable with some standard curriculum and some community learning; and
- Allowing youth work to be organic in approaches to helping the young people.

Conversely, the group also discussed what doesn't work well. Some examples were—

- Inconsistency of youth worker availability in schools;
- Uncertainty of the extent of the youth work's responsibility and a lack mutual respect between some teachers and youth workers; and
- Some employers are not aware of the value of awards for achievement.

The group discussed where there are barriers to improvement from both the point of view of professionals and young people—

### *For Organisations/Youth Workers/Teachers*

- Young people can immediately “smell out” people who don’t understand them and switch off very quickly if rapport is not established;
- cultural gaps between professionals and young people;
- Teaching staff are not always positive about other options for young people, some treat the young people differently; and
- Difficulty for organisations from outside the school cut through the “territorialism” to get access and funding to work with pupils from low-income families.

### *For Young People*

- Home situations;
- Having care responsibilities;
- Lack of confidence;
- Drug and alcohol addictions (the young people and parents);
- Finding the right person to speak to; and
- Mental health.

Having said that, the group was clear that professionals should have an asset-based approach.

The group talked about the increase in mental health and wellbeing issues. It was recognised that levels of confidence and happiness were decreasing.

The young people in the group talked about having someone who is approachable that they can speak and trust is really important. They felt having this freedom / trust to speak to the achieve coordinator relieved exam pressure. They liked what they learned at the achieve group because they felt it was more real to life. Pupils who don’t speak in other classes were more confident in their group.

The group discussed what can be improved. Some examples were—

- Have more consistency in the delivery of youth work across the country;
- More mainstream acceptance of the value of youth work;
- Greater collaboration with other education establishments;
- Use digital technology to share people’s stories / successes.

The regional collaboratives were identified by one participant as an opportunity to coordinate a more standardised approach to having community learning in schools.

It was recognised that it can be difficult to measure the effects of community learning. One suggested that its impact could be measured by the level of engagement of young people and what their destinations. Another more qualitative measure would be levels of resilience and confidence of young people.

## **Group 2 EIS, Connect, The Spark, and MYSPs**

### **Uniforms**

A parent suggested that it is hard for teenagers to say they need financial support including taking part in uniform exchanges but they can be 'hauled up' if they do not have the right kit (sports kit and three sets of school uniforms).

A teacher suggested making different decisions on approach to things like uniform requirements means remedial measures for those who cannot afford uniforms less necessary. Blazers, formal braiding for different years of school, tie and formal shirt were cited as placing 'unrealistic financial demands' on families. Some children will only own one pair of shoes and affording uniform is an added expense.

A parent suggested their child was unaware of their financial situation as the parent felt children go through so much at school age anyway.

### **Nutrition**

There was a lot of focus on the importance of nutrition in this group. A parent had undertaken a lot of study on nutrition to support their child with additional support needs and highlighted the benefits of such interventions. They suggested letting children go to the shops at lunchtimes meant a lot of students ate poor quality foods and children using cashless cards for free school meals go to the shops to be with their friends and forgo eating lunch. They suggested children studying on empty stomachs or after eating chocolate bars from the shops would not assist concentration in the afternoon lessons and therefore would limit attainment. The parent felt:

- concentration goes up and bad behaviour goes down if there is more of a focus on nutrition in schools; and
- there is a need to get parents into schools and engage with the direct about nutritional choices.

Another parent suggested having children going to shops in large numbers does not always help how they are perceived in the wider community. A teacher mentioned that 8% of Finland's education budget was spent on free school meals and that Finland's policies have nutrition very closely aligned with education.

A member discussed the social value of children learning the importance of sitting and eating together. A parent suggested school staff sitting with children during lunch could be valuable, a teacher suggested in response that protecting the children's social time was important. A young person suggested one limiting factor was the size of high school canteens – their high school having 1700 pupils and a canteen that has a capacity of 400.

A young person mentioned that their council cut breakfast clubs so the school used attainment funding and asked 6<sup>th</sup> year home economics students to provide the food. This was a big success.

A young person mentioned the stigma attached to going to the canteen as other children and young people know you are having free school meals and as a result a lot of people do not go to the canteen to have lunch.

A parent suggests that situation arises because when decisions are imposed by a school it does not work as they are not adopted, schools need to reach decisions with young people and parents. A teacher suggested it was also important to give changes time to bed-in or to make staged changes. Another teacher suggested nutritional learning is needed, people cannot make changes by edict, people need to know why changes are happening.

## **Visits**

A parent suggested schools compete to provide the most exotic trips and another parent suggest that any trips provided should be accessible to all. Going to activities centres owned by the council for a few days can be very expensive. A counsellor mentioned a school they worked in had used PEF money to ensure all P7s could go on one final trip together before they left for high school.

## **Parental engagement**

A parent suggested it was challenging for schools to make school feel like an approachable place for parents who may lack the confidence to approach them. It is a very sensitive conversation to have, highlighting your financial situation to school staff. It would be helpful if it was clearer for parents to know who to contact in a school, what the various communication channels are.

## **Mental health**

A counsellor talked about the value of mental health support within schools including having a relaxed private space where children can drop in and talk about things. A school they work in has used PEF funding for 1 to 1 counselling. Spark is embedded in a number of schools, some counsellors are in schools regularly, some one day a week, others four days a week. They find that it is often the quiet children who seem okay that benefit from contact and support. A benefit of the role is they are not seen as a teacher by the children, they are called by their first name by children. They gave an example of seeing a fight in the dining hall and going up to the child that started it and saying to pop into their room whenever suits and there is sand and other things to play with. Those children once they have talked often reveal an underlying issue and the counsellor gains agreement to speak to their teacher for them or with them.

A young person suggested a key part of that being a success was to have a private space for young people to talk. At their school there were seven teachers that were based in the office where you are directed to to get support.

A teacher said these kinds of relationships are also naturally occurring in schools between teachers and children, including pastoral care teachers. However caseloads are often high for pupil support teachers, sometimes 300 pupils per teacher. It would

be beneficial if counselling support in whatever form could be universally built into the system.

A parent suggested youth workers often performed this valuable function of go-between between the young person and the teacher, as they are not perceived to be in the position of authority that a teacher can be.

A teacher agreed that mental health was one of the biggest barriers for young people and that seasons for growth, place to be, quarries and others being involved in schools is valuable but provision is patchy.

A parent suggested CAMHS is relied upon but you could wait a year or more and there is a gulf support for lower level mental health issues and crisis cases.

A member suggested that CAMHS was for crisis cases but also had a big back log of sub-crisis cases.

A parent suggested children are often trying to 'hold it together' for a parent. Another parent suggested there is an issue again for parents about knowing who to go to in schools if they are concerned about their child's mental health. In addition young people try to handle their stresses and anxieties on their own or with their peers and this is often due to a mistrust of adults.

A counsellor suggested there is a need to 'normalise' talking in schools. Another counsellor suggested they want teachers to be able to teach and properly trained counsellors should be in schools for real early intervention. However they highlighted a workforce issue as there is an insufficient number of trained counsellors.

A teacher mentioned that learning support teachers do not exist anymore in a number of local authorities. Lots of schools are using PEF money for those roles but the teacher was not sure of the longevity of the funding so some schools have not used it for that. They suggested it will never be known what difference it would have made if core funding had been restored for services that have gone but have not been replaced.

### **Final comments**

There was general agreement that the fundamentals that needed to be provided were quality nutrition and mental health services and that if these could be delivered many of the 'sticking plaster' approaches would not be needed.