

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

Attainment and achievement of school aged children experiencing poverty

Informal discussion group

Wednesday 2 May 2018

The Committee held an informal meeting prior to its Committee meeting on 2 May 2018. The Committee invited the organisations giving evidence to the Committee to bring along individuals who work on the front-line, including teachers, a health specialist, third-sector workers, and parents.

A third sector representative began with an underlying principle point - they suggested that initiatives come and go but any initiative based on the principle that what is impacting on the family informs what is happening with the child. A second representative suggested parents' experience of school, especially negative experiences means they can feel daunted by schools. An example of the impact of poverty of attendance was two boys who had a bath a week using water heated in a kettle did not attend school because they were embarrassed that they might smell bad.

Income maximisation starting in schools

A health specialist outlined work with the Edinburgh 1 in 5 project and emphasised the need to consider the practical detail when trying to poverty proof schools including down to small amounts of money such as £1 donations required.

Phase 1 pilot of the work provided support to families in claiming benefits and £4.5k is the average amount each family now receives and schools have reported a 'massive' change in the engagement of pupils. This work starts in the schools, for one family it started with unpicking why a child in school was not claiming free school meals.

A parent suggested it was about what schools can do to help and what the third sector can do to augment ie these challenges are too much for individual schools to tackle and the success of the third sector independent person is that they can build up relationships with a family quickly and step back from what is impacting on the child directly and work out what the link is to the family's situation.

A third sector representative suggested that it is so important to acknowledge the level of expectation on schools and to give as much support as possible. They gave the example of a health and wellbeing programme they were assisting with and this involved not just issuing the information to them but training staff including on how to communicate well with children as a lot of establishments still have a disciplinary approach. Feedback on the programme showed 48% reduction in aggression and a 45% increase in concentration. The level of engagement from parents in such programmes varies greatly. They suggested that calling yourself a 'family worker' helps to remove the stigma of the idea you are a social worker.

Parental mental health

A parent suggested one of the biggest barriers to engagement was parental mental health. A third sector representative agreed that mental health was a big barrier and suggested getting over the hurdle of the fear and lack of confidence from parents is hard and a slow process and requires establishing trust. Family learning coordinators have proved a success including in school holidays, offering free lunches and participation sessions. Cycling activities started by the organisation has now been adopted by one of the parents who now runs the initiative.

A headteacher talked about starting as headteacher 8 years ago in an area of deprivation and knew they needed to establish relationships for support quickly with organisations like Barnardo's. They emphasised it takes years to measure progress and have the patience to ensure its embedded and then it starts reaching out across school and beyond. The school tracks children through P1 to P7 as part of their journey. The school provides opportunities for wider achievement too as it is lacking in the community including music grades.

A parent said aspiration is there in parents for their children but it is about knowing how to access support.

Homework

A member asked about homework creating an extra pressure on families. A teacher suggested that evidence shows that there is not that much benefit from homework and sometimes it is not helpful as it reinforces the gap between families where parents can support their children and those that cannot (for example where parents are not able to read).

A parent suggested that if school is stressful for a child then homework brings that associated stress home with them. A youth worker suggested that where a parent is stressed that they cannot help their child then a child can become anxious as a result.

A headteacher also highlighted the poverty of time where parents are working long hours and would prefer to spend the time they have with their children on developmental play. Another teacher said that the school's homework policy states that a child should not be put under pressure if they have not done their homework. The school provides reading nooks the children design themselves and teachers do early bird book readings each morning.

Barriers to accessing entitlements

The headteacher went on to highlight that cashless schools in Edinburgh had been a positive as it had removed one barrier. However the need to choose meals for children online created a barrier for parents without the technology to do this at home. The school set up drop-in sessions for parents so they could set up an email account and pick lunches with support from the school staff. The school runs drop in sessions for registering for clubs children are entitled to for free if they have free

school meals. A teacher suggested there was a need to think of the accessibility for the users whenever designing new systems.

The Public Health Practitioner questioned why there is not an equality impact assessment (EQIA) on changes to systems that are introduced.