

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

Attainment and achievement of school aged children experiencing poverty

Informal discussion group

Wednesday 9 May 2018

The Committee held a focus group in advance of the formal Committee meeting on 9 May 2018 involving adult learning workers, youth workers, organisations specialising in volunteering and others.

Members in attendance were:

Oliver Mundell MSP

Tavish Scott MSP

Liz Smith MSP

Volunteering

There is evidence of the positive effect volunteering has on young people in education. Often it is a key part of gaining confidence. Research shows 'soft skills' are aided by forms of volunteering.

Clients of one organisation then became volunteers and in turn a number of volunteers became community workers.

Role models

Every family one community worker worked with said they had 'crap' parents so they have no positive parental role model. So they have no role model for anything from budgeting to why it's not good to have children watching TV all day. An official letter often sends people into a panic as parents see it as 'them and us'. Volunteers investing time and spending three months to seek to establish trust at the outset is very worthwhile as people can then move on with the volunteers to thinking about how to improve life, including by engaging with education.

The family based approach

Another community worker said their organisation was moving to a much more family based approach. PEF money was being used to bring the organisation into schools. This helps remove the barrier between schools and pupils and the community workers 'broker' between the two and that in turn helps get parents into schools. This work is at an early stage but the signs were that it was working.

This comment was supported by other attendees who suggested that while schools can recognise the issue, families need other services to overcome the barrier between school and parents. One suggested this was because parents had no confidence presenting at school and adult educators can be there on the side of parents.

One community worker suggested they have had feedback from schools in rural areas that they cannot achieve the same outcomes as community workers using educational staff, partly because there are no mental health staff trained as part of the core staff.

Nutrition

Early intervention was raised as extremely important, including in relation to nutrition. One organisation runs children and parent cookery classes. Teachers at a local school are keen to arrange for these lessons to take place in schools as this will help schools to be perceived as welcoming by parents. This was supported by other attendees as a positive step, one person citing the positive relationships that have grown from food projects and income maximisation work has followed this initial contact. This has helped parents change energy tariff, internet supplier or highlight basics they need like a bed for their child.

Another attendee suggested that eating together is such a leveller and the most successful initiatives they have run have been based around food in the summer holidays.

Another attendee suggested the nutritional element is 'massively important'. Young people growing fruit and veg at lunchtime at one school has led to the start of a social enterprise. Another attendee agreed and added the example of an allotment they had and they had collaborated with a food charity to have a barbecue with the fruit and vegetables and lots of the parents and children were 'astonished' at how good fresh fruit and veg tasted. A final comment from another attendee on nutrition was that more support was needed in schools for home economics as this is being 'cut'.

Commissioning new services and seeking support from existing services

A number of attendees identified a barrier being that work is still not joining up between schools and the community. There was a growing recognition that schools cannot perform all the necessary functions but teachers still need support to know what support is out there and that the risk of putting yourself out there and seeking community support is a minimal risk and worth taking. Otherwise there was a concern that headteachers are commissioning new services through PEF when the necessary service already exists. One attendee said that the expectation on headteachers to know all that is going on in their communities is unrealistic and there was a risk of overburdening them. The connections need to come from local authority level.

Breakfast clubs

It was highlighted that there was a need for good quality long term longitudinal studies on what makes a difference as PEF funding is short term and 'sporadic'.

A member asked about the value of breakfast clubs. An example was cited in response where PEF was used at a local authority secondary school and a primary school to fund a breakfast club and associated activities. The evidence the organisation was aware of suggested that for some breakfast provision was the most important intervention that aids learning. Another attendee mentioned that free breakfast for all removes the stigma of some attending and some not. Parents do not

want to be identified as struggling, often they are working 60 hour weeks and there is a sense of failure if they were to be identified.

Cost of the school day

On the cost of the curriculum one attendee suggested parents are expected to pay a lot of money for school when you add it all up (home economics, craft design and technology, uniforms, trips etc). A number of attendees agreed with this and that there was a stigma attached to having to present yourself at school to make yourself eligible for financial support from the school for trips or other costs and so the parent then does not send their child to school or on a particular trip.

One attendee gave the example of school uniforms where children were given a sticker to wear to highlight that their school uniform was not adequate and they were sent home with this sticker on so their parents were made aware. Another attendee said they knew of parents getting into debt to ensure their children's uniforms were up to the same standard as the other children. Another attendee said that of fundamental importance for young people is the need to present as being the same as others in their peer group.

Digital exclusion

One attendee raised digital exclusion, citing Ofcom statistics that show those in deprived areas are the most likely not to have a landline or other phone. Increasingly new means of parental engagement are online.

Attainment and achievement

A Member asked whether policy makers need a better balance between the focus on achievement and attainment. A service manager responded to say that their organisation offered vocational awards covering the 'wider world' and young people get a certificate, feel they are achieving something, and often go on to become involved in volunteering or a connected activity as a result. Someone else from the same organisation suggested there was evidence that schools are not letting some students stay on as their results would impact on the school's statistics. They suggested schools should have monetary incentives to retain looked after children at school. Another attendee echoed those comments saying she knew from personal experience of someone who was asked to leave school due to their attainment and so a focus on achievement not attainment was 'crucial'. Another attendee agreed and acknowledged that if schools are judged on attainment then understandably that is what they will aim for. Someone else said that in schools what gets measured gets done. Other attendees suggested activity agreements do work but funding for these was varied between local authorities.

The final point was made by a life coach who suggested that, irrespective of whether they take an attainment or an achievement route, young people succeed if they are provided with an environment where they can get into a mindset where they are valued.

At the end of the session an attendee felt they had not made all the points they had wanted to and so sent the Clerk to the Committee the follow-up observations below.

I am a volunteer co-ordinator and work on a project supporting families that have children due to start nursery or school. This support is aimed at supporting families in the home environment to prepare for the journey of starting school to encourage good routines, early literacy and numeracy, personal hygiene and early independence skills. This is to ensure that children are able to cope with the school day without being tired, hungry or at the disadvantage of not having achieved these skills before starting school.

The barriers to this project have been firstly from the schools as they have so much to think about and often are not aware of what situations families are in at home and therefore do not refer them into the project. Building relationships with schools has been something that has taken a long time and is still a work in progress. Schools often do not know what is available and what this service provides and therefore they are not keen to promote something they do not know much about.

I genuinely believe this type of support, modelling good parenting skills to make the journey into starting school a lot easier, is a key approach. To help parents to bridge the gap between themselves and the school setting is vital to engaging parents in their child's education.

We have a number of families who are currently benefitting from this support with one family saying " This is exactly what I've been waiting for" and another family saying to me that "I am amazed at the change in relationship between my three children. They are playing so much better together and our house is a happier place".

Having a happy home with happy and confident parents is only going to have a positive impact on the children. Having positive role models is critical to young children to have the best possible start in life. More work could certainly be done around third sector and school partnership relationships. It is something that comes very easily in some schools and is something very challenging in others. Receiving the "go ahead" from the Head Teacher isn't always good enough. The attitudes and knowledge of the staff that see the families every day is critical to positive change and partnership working.