

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

Attainment and achievement of school aged children experiencing poverty

Evening meeting at Muirhouse Millennium Centre 16 May 2018

The Committee held a meeting on the evening of 16 May 2018 at the Muirhouse Millennium Centre in the north Edinburgh. The event was attended by around 50 people, including young people, parents, youth workers, teachers, academics, third sector workers and others.

The event was attended by James Dornan MSP, Johann Lamont MSP, Oliver Mundell MSP and Gillian Martin MSP. Each member took a discussion group and notes of those discussions are below.

The Committee would like to thank everyone who attended the meeting.

Group 1 – James Dornan MSP

James Dornan MSP met with a group of six young people from Liberton and Castebræe High Schools in Edinburgh. The young people were accompanied by two youth workers.

Key issues

School uniform

- The cost of buying school uniform was identified as an issue for many families.
- At the same time the school uniform policy is strictly enforced with pupils receiving punishments including detention for failure to comply.
- The young people considered that they should be able to wear what they want to school. They felt that this would make them feel more comfortable and aid learning.
- Some pupils experienced bullying about the standard or cleanliness of their school clothes.
- It was pointed out that teachers can wear what they want in the classroom.

Other costs of attending school

- Some of the young people faced a choice of a lengthy walk to school (up to 40 minutes) or the cost of a return bus fare (£2.00 per day).
- The cost of attending clubs or participating in school trips was also a barrier for some.

Access to technology

- Access to technology to support learning was reported to be unequal. Some schools gave pupils access to iPads in S5 but only if individual attendance was above 90 percent.
- In the classroom, some teachers accepted or encouraged the use of personal mobile phones for online research but wifi access was not available. This meant that pupils needed to use personal data allowance for in school study. Young people were also not allowed to charge phones in class.

Curriculum choice

- The young people reported frustration that some subjects they wanted to study from S3 onwards were not available to them because of oversubscription or timetabling clashes. They expressed a desire to be able to switch subjects in S4.

Careers guidance

- It was reported that guidance about career options was not offered prior to subject choices made in S2.
- Most of the young people had careers in mind but felt that they had little if any access to advice at school, beyond referral to online resources, about how to pursue their preferred path.

Parental and other support for learning

- Many of the young people reported limited involvement of parents in their learning, largely as a consequence of being busy working.
- Some young people found it difficult to complete homework either because of an absence of appropriate quiet space at home or a lack of support (whether from a parent or other person) when difficulties were encountered.
- One young person was receiving tutoring in English and Maths, paid for by a grandparent, at a cost of £100 per month. This was to support learning missed at an earlier stage at school.
- Few parents were engaged with or by the school.

School meals

- The young people reported a sense of stigma for those in receipt of free school meals as they were not able to exercise the same choices as their peers (e.g. go to shops outside school).
- School meals were described as being both too expensive and too healthy which made them unpopular.
- School breakfast clubs were available but most young people didn't get to school early enough to access them.

Group 2 – Johann Lamont

The group consisted of members of the North Edinburgh Young People's Forum; staff from the Higher Education sector, whose roles focussed on widening access to university for students from diverse backgrounds; and staff from Third Sector organisations, Youth Development Groups, and local community groups that provide support to young people experiencing poverty to enable them to achieve at school.

The support available for families and young people experiencing poverty to help those children to achieve and attain at school.

The group highlighted a number of examples of potential support for young people experiencing poverty to attain at school including:

- Attainment champions: teachers who select a cohort of pupils to work with to support them to achieve their educational goals.
- Guidance Teachers and PSE programmes were seen as “crucial to recognising people drifting away from school.”
- Youth groups, Youth development groups, charitable foundations and CLD organisations were also highlighted as a “medium to support young people experience poverty to achieve at school” and to provide guidance and alternative pathways for young people to ensure they reach “positive destinations” upon leaving school and steer them away from negative role models and lifestyles.
- Skills Development Scotland and careers advice
- Additional vocational courses

The impact of the support available: what works well and what doesn't.

Attainment Champions

Young people in attendance were positive about their experience with “Attainment Champions.” One young person, who particularly enjoyed PE, has been working with their PE teacher to achieve educational goals and overcome a lack of engagement with school by being set achievable goals and being rewarded with additional PE activities upon completion of particular tasks.

However, the group were unsure about to extent in which the practice of Attainment Champions was spread across schools.

Guidance Teachers

Some young people commented that they were “meant to have a guidance teacher” but were not always able to access support from guidance teachers. Others noted that if a “guidance teacher does not pick up an issue then a young person could be part of a silent choir” and not be fully supported to overcome difficulties blocking their attainment. In other words, if the young person is “not causing the system a problem” – by acting up, misbehaving, showing violent behaviour or completely failing classes – they could struggle to access support.

Additional Support via Third Sector

The young people in attendance were supportive of additional support provided by Third Sector organisations such as the North Edinburgh Young People's Forum, Muirhouse Youth Development Group, and various Neighbourhood centres and Youth Groups. These organisations enable young people to gain new experiences and access support such as alternative learning and development environments and Breakfast Clubs which ensure young people can go to school with a full stomach and ready to learn.

The group also highlighted charitable foundations such as "Key to Potential" that work with students electing to leave school at the end of the December term to "harness their passion" and identify "appropriate positive destinations" for young people.

However, some staff felt that additional support services could be used as a "dumping ground" by schools to deal with students who are causing problems in a traditional education setting. Staff added that the sudden arrival of a disruptive student could impact on the positive learning environment that had been generated over several weeks of hard work. This may then have a negative impact on young people who are interacting with an additional support service.

The group did note that it was important not to "lay all problems at the doors of teachers" who already have workload pressures. These pressures were identified as a potential barrier to teachers being able to provide the pastoral care they would wish.

Support in Primary School vs Secondary School

Participants noted while "High Schools are not perfect, there is flexible support" to help narrow the attainment gap, but "at primary school it is just the primary teacher there to support young people". Many participants stressed that intervening in high school was too late as contributing factors to low attainment begin at primary school, and early learning environments.

One participant stated that "people expect too much from schools – a lot of issues come from family and home environment". Parents may have had a bad experience at school and a wariness of education establishments could be passed on to their children.

The group also noted a "lack of transitional support" for when children move from primary to secondary school.

The group stressed the need for "support starting earlier to work with young people at primary school to focus on identifying positive destinations and attainment."

Careers Advice

Young people were unhappy about the level of careers advice available to them. One young person highlighted that their experience of careers advice was "one

session with a careers advisor” where they were “directed to a website with a list of what grades you needed” to go to a certain college or university.

Other young people noted that in their experience the careers advisor did not have capacity to “see all pupils in the school” so students had to pro-actively seek out careers advice. Others in the group added that those experiencing poverty were less likely to seek out support and advice.

Additional Vocational Courses

Young people said that they enjoyed opportunities to take part in alternative courses outside of school to help them learn new skills. One said that they felt that young people were “treated like adults in courses – and like a kid at school.” However, the group highlighted that only a small number of students get access to these opportunities and the aforementioned “silent choir” of young people “miss out on opportunities if they are not a problem pupil.”

Another participant noted that she was lucky to find space on a Life Guard Course for a young person she supported only because of her professional networks, they noted “it is not what you know, it is who you know” when it comes to providing access to attainment support for deprived young people.

Barriers to success

The group noted a number of barriers that hinder the ability of young people to access support to help them achieve and attain. These included:

- Lack of Mental Health Provision
- Lack of Support for single parent families
- Schools not having the capacity to find appropriate support for young people
- Larger class sizes and lack of additional physical spaces within school meant that teachers may have to carry out “crowd management” instead of having complete focus on the attainment needs of young people
- Ownership of schools via PPP affect access to school facilities outside school hours meaning that additional support or extracurricular activities to support attainment are more expensive and cumbersome to organise
- Lack of sustainability within third sector funding models leads to short term projects which can initially have a positive impact but then be removed from the community in the next financial year or at the end of a particular project
- “Tick box exercises for positive destinations” can perhaps encourage placing young people in “stereotypical destinations”. That is, trade apprenticeships for boys, hair dressing for girls, rather than finding appropriate development and attainment opportunities that reflect the needs and interests of the individual.
- Lack of awareness of positive activities going on, with staff and schools not being able to direct young people to appropriate support.
- Young people said they felt confused and saddened by the physical “separation of university kids and college kids” during High School career events. Attendees noted that this practice creates a narrative that university is the best option that can only be achieved by the brightest pupils.

What more could be done to support young people from families that experience poverty to do well at school.

The group noted a number of ideas that could be implemented to support young people who experience poverty to do well at school. These included:

- Improving access to school facilities outside of school hours
- An increased focus on the family environment and identifying early opportunities to support young people to do well at school
- Longer term funding for localised small support teams to support young people to attain
- Being more “children focussed” allowing young people to have more control over their ability to access support and require support services to “understand young people and listen more”
- Identifying children from SIMD 1 backgrounds who may not traditionally go to university and engage with them from P7-S6 to create a bespoke programme with them to improve their chances to do well at school – an example from work done by a local university found that this method helped 14 out of the 18 selected young people to be granted a university place by the end of S6.
- Review and refresh on career advice, skills development support and guidance support
- Supporting young people with the UCAS process and experimenting with enabling pupils with lower grades in certain university courses
- Highlighting the college route and other options available to support young people to attain
- More support for schools to provide “pastoral care”
- Finding ways to “harness the passion” of young people in order for them to find ways to attain the relevant skills they require to do what they want to do in their lives and future careers

Group 3 – Oliver Mundell MSP

This group was made up of mainly voluntary sector organisations and also included parents and a young person. The group discussed what would be positive support for young people and their families, along with some of the barriers that they face.

Support

Participants all value homework clubs because they supported the parents who have issues with their own literacy and numeracy skills, however provision was said to be patchy. They said homework clubs are essential especially since some children/young people have no online access at home, no quiet space to work and very little input from parents who had other issues going on. To ensure a more consistent provision across different schools and local authorities, the group thought that councils should explore running homework clubs with volunteers to keep costs down.

Additionally parents may have been taught using different teaching methodologies and it was felt that support for these parents through after school/homework clubs would be useful to avoid confusion.

One of the attendees talked about a primary school that is engaging the parents through a book club during which food is provided. The school has also worked with fathers by putting on a cartoon making session for them and also engaging fathers in thinking about the suitability of certain books for their children's age group.

Barriers

The group identified the following barriers to supporting children who experience poverty—

- The group thought that one of the main barriers is aspiration. If the parents have multiple issues it is difficult for young people to have aspirations beyond their lived experience.
- Many forms and pieces of homework are expected to be done online now and not everyone has access to internet and some parents do not know how to use IT.
- Cost of getting to school for both parents and child, this also a barrier for parents engaging with school for parent's evenings and other activities.
- Anxiety can be an issue both for the young person and the parent/guardian. Parents' anxiety often comes from their own negative experiences at school.
- Lack of confidence. Young people are putting up a mask that they are ok while lacking confidence and this can lead to some of their behaviour in school.
- School day costs such as uniforms, transport, school trips, dress down days and school meals. The stigma of applying for free meals was raised.
- Teachers were so busy in class teaching and expecting them to do anything else could be a push on their time.

One attendee noted that schools and others try hard to engage with parents but sometimes this fails, for example leaving a voicemail costs to listen back – money that they cannot afford. As a way round this she makes sure that the parents she is working with have 'WhatsApp' which is free.

Another participant works in the creative sector and is trying to engage young people in the arts through offering free tickets, bus fares and refreshments.

Benefits

Applying for and knowing which benefits they may qualify was identified as "a huge barrier". Often parents can struggle to complete the forms because of the bureaucratic language used and it would also be helpful if forms were available in more languages for non-English speakers. Some parents may not engage with agencies and schools and therefore may be unaware of the benefits they entitled to. The Education Maintenance Allowance form was identified as being particularly difficult to complete. Participants said that if there were more pupil support officers visiting families, they could signpost parents to services to help with benefit

applications. It was also suggested that the voluntary sector have the link between school and home and could signpost parents to information on benefits.

Getting a bank account to get benefits paid into was also challenging if you don't have a passport or drivers' licence.

One of the attendees worked with young people who have a disability and pointed that parents often can't work because of their caring responsibilities. They are often struggling financially and the move toward self-directed support is causing issues. Having to employ people to work with their children is creating additional anxiety. This change is also affecting voluntary organisations' funding.

Ethnic Minorities and Refugees

Black and minority ethnic people may have additional barriers to education. Parental involvement with school can be poor in these groups if their own experiences of those in authority have been poor. Language is a huge barrier young people can support parents in the English language. More ESOL teachers would help with the engagement of parents in their child's learning. The group also agreed that more training on ESOL for all teachers would help.

Several participants also talked about delays in Home Office decision-making. They know of teenagers who have been waiting for five years to have their status confirmed and those young people cannot access further or higher education until this happens.

The level of support for young people from BME backgrounds varied tremendously between schools. A young person in the group talked about her experience at school which made sure she had extra time in exams to assist with language barriers, yet her friends in a school nearby did not.

Schools

The group felt that early intervention was really important and that organisations such as Home-Start and Peep are best placed to bridge the gap between school and home. It was felt that being able to build trust and having a home visit made the biggest impact. This gives a broader picture of the child's life.

There was also a view that maths and English were always talked about but there was a lack of focus on health and wellbeing. It was said that if health and wellbeing were given a higher priority it would help attainment as "you can't achieve if you are hungry and experiencing mental health issues".

Pupil Equity Funding was broadly welcomed participants noted that it is too early to know its impact.

The entire group felt there was a naivety in the perception that schools can narrow the attainment gap without a major societal change.

Group 4 – Gillian Martin MSP

Opening remarks noted that one impact of poverty was that recently referrals to services/special schools from mainstream schools has gone up and that even in more affluent areas there are emerging pockets of young people affected by poverty.

Additional funding and support

Members of the group said that funding is often allocated to the young people schools identify as requiring support. However, young people's needs may not be obvious in a school setting but they nonetheless may require support. Those accessing funding and programmes in schools can feel stigmatised and there needs to be more emphasis on programmes outwith schools that enable engagement with young people to help them access support.

The group discussed Pupil Equity Funding (PEF). Some of the comments were:

- PEF can lead to short term interventions, and there needs to be a long-term change in culture – work to challenge where aspirations come from and why young people think or believe certain things when it comes to their own achievements. One example of a project delivering this work in a school was only there one day a week.
- With PEF, schools can choose what to spend the money on and often technology or extra staff are chosen rather than additional support services involving family support or youth work. Schools are often using funds to make up for what they have lost rather than gaining anything new.
- PEF is used in schools and there is not enough focus on the voluntary and youth work sector – more support should be available outwith schools to focus on home life and the impact this has on learning. Family support services have a positive impact but are difficult to deliver.

There was said to be a disparity between funding and the delivery of services – often short-term funding is awarded to new ideas and services, and existing, good pieces of work struggle to get funding. More emphasis on the impact of services, including longer-term, is needed. However, this needs to be done creatively – being asked to evidence impact can mean formality and rigid processes that don't allow room for flexibility. Names and marketing of programmes can be important – they need to be appealing. Mapping progress into adulthood also needs to be thought about. Often the outcomes we have are a snapshot in time and longer-term lived experiences are important.

Members of the group said that services need to be delivered in schools in a consistent, planned and strategic way – not one-offs or short-term. Parents can become disillusioned by the number of different services/agencies that they see. Third sector services can provide much more flexibility than statutory services.

Non-targeting of specific families and/or pupils was also identified as being a good model – equality of access to avoid stigma.

Giving young people ownership of services was also suggested as a good model. For services to be continued it is more likely if young people are invested – for example, by running and planning things themselves. They can gain skills through this that are not always noticed in schools or measured by qualifications. Peer groups and peer support can be crucial for some young people.

Ultimately, a child-centred approach should be at the heart of any work being done and flexibility of approach is crucial.

Flexibility and the 3rd sector

Some members of the group argued that support needs to be available to young people when they need to access it, not dictated by when services are timetabled within schools. Teachers need help with support to enable them to focus on teaching.

It was said that formal systems can create a barrier and lack of trust – relationships are often easier to build with people that young people see every day. Young people who ‘act-out’ get access to services because they are noticed, whereas young people who internalise can be missed and not get the support that they need. Building relationships was identified as crucial to tackling this.

Another participant said that a holistic view of family learning is needed and culture change is required – services need to be designed and delivered in a way that works for each local area or school and not have a ‘one-size fits all’ approach.

Across schools there was said to be a lack of third sector knowledge about what services are available or how services can be adapted within schools to serve their particular purposes. Headteachers’ role was said to be important; often they might not know where to look for interventions, but when headteachers are aware they can become ‘champions’ and highlight services to other schools. This peer communication and dialogue between teachers and schools was identified as important.

It was said that for family learning support services to work, staff having a personal relationship and connection with families is crucial. A culture can exist where parents’ negative experiences of education creates mistrust so trust needs to be created. Schools contacting parents can be viewed by them as a criticism – engagement with the third sector is often more successful. People need support to be involved – from access to transport, to health and wellbeing support, as well as being signposted to other services that they have access to. Teachers can be stretched and lack the time to build strong relationships with families.

Pastoral support in schools

Teachers who have worries and concerns about pupils don’t always have the skills and/or knowledge to handle these. Often the issues they are seeing are not at a level where social work intervention is required so these young people and families can go without the support that they need. Linked to this, poverty can go unnoticed in

schools – staff are often only aware that there are issues, or support only becomes available, when a crisis happens. Using PEF schools have an opportunity to focus on groups that are not meeting higher levels of concerns.

When there is a need to access psychological services this can be slow, and there is often a lot to overcome before people can engage on issues related to attainment – better links between schools and these services are needed. Many of these services are oversubscribed and are finding that actually issues they are being asked to support are linked to other factors, such as lack of sleep, rather than mental health.