

National Assembly for Wales

Children and Young People Committee

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Inquiry into Educational Outcomes for Children from Low Income Households

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**1. The effectiveness of Welsh Government policy and strategy in mitigating the link between poverty and educational outcomes, including the ‘Tackling Poverty Action Plan’; relevant education policy; and broader Welsh Government policies in this regard, for example Communities First.**

- From the time of the introduction of the RAISE grant in 2006, there has been increasing focus by the Welsh Government’s Education Department and the education system in Wales on reducing the impact of poverty on educational achievement. It could be argued, as the Minister for Education and Skills has recently recognised, that significant future improvement in our education system will not be achieved unless progress is made in ‘narrowing the gap’ in educational achievement. In recent years as part of its tackling poverty programme, this has also become one of the main priorities of the whole Welsh Government. The ‘Tackling Poverty Action Plan’ sees improvements in educational achievement as being critically important to helping people out of poverty through gaining employment, in preventing future poverty and to some extent in mitigating the effect of current poverty.
- The record of success of the Welsh education system including the Welsh Government in achieving these objectives is at best mixed and overall is poor.
- Whilst it is early days to make secure judgements about the new Foundation Phase curriculum, a recent interim evaluation report suggests that it is not leading to a ‘narrowing of the gap’ to the extent that was envisaged. The Minister has responded by commissioning an enquiry into why this situation exists. Evidence suggests that by the time they begin formal schooling, children from our most disadvantaged homes can be up to a year behind in aspects of their cognitive development. Given the international evidence that early years education can make a significant

difference in overcoming these effects, it is, therefore, critically important that the large investment that has been made in the Foundation Phase (supported by Flying Start and other aspects of pre-school education) lead to continuing improvements in the achievement of 3 to 7 year olds from our most needy families.

- In the phases of education covering the later stages of primary education and through secondary education the picture is a mixed one, but overall it continues to give cause for concern. Over the five years between 2005 and 2007, there has been improvement in the expected levels of performance of children receiving Free School Meals by the ages of 11 and 14 (measured by teacher assessment) and a smaller improvement in the achievement of 15 year olds of 5 'good' GCSE's including English ( or Welsh First Language) and Mathematics. There has been a small reduction in the gap between FSM children and non-FSM children at the age of 11(4.4%) and a very small decrease (0.5 per cent) at the age of 14. For the achievement of 5 'good' GCSEs including English (or Welsh First Language) and Mathematics, the gap has actually grown by 3.5 per cent.
- The final indicator above is generally accepted as a crucial one. If young people are to have a reasonable chance after the age of sixteen of proceeding to an apprenticeship or moving to a good sixth form or tertiary course and eventually on to further/ higher education and entering the labour market, achieving what is now known as a Level 2 Inclusive qualification is seen to be the key enabler. Even in the period of recession we are passing through and with the knowledge we now have of the extent of 'in work' poverty, educational skills and qualifications are still the best safeguard for moving out of poverty through employment and in preventing future poverty. Currently no more than a quarter of our young people in Wales who are growing up in poverty achieve this level of qualification, after twelve years in full-time education. In some of our most disadvantaged schools and communities the percentage is much lower than this.
- There are of course examples in the education system in Wales where these trends have been bucked, but as a whole the system does not have the knowledge or the level of performance to tackle what is effectively the great 'fault-line' in our educational performance.
- Some Welsh Government policies, including Flying Start, Communities First and RAISE have contributed to the progress that has been made. Estyn has pointed to good practice at individual school level. What this does not represent, however, is evidence of a system-wide improvement

of the type that is enabling some nations and areas of the world to break the link between disadvantage and low achievement and to build successful and equitable education systems.

- How could this be achieved in Wales? Firstly, the Welsh Government and the Regional Education Consortia can do considerably more than they are currently, within existing resources, through 'policy bending'. Secondly, through community-based approaches which bring schools, families and communities together in a common purpose. Progress is being made in each of these areas, but there is far more that can and should be done.
- The first of these solutions should build upon the knowledge we have from research and inspection evidence that schools can make a significant difference for their most needy pupils. This requires purposeful leadership from Governing bodies and from leaders at all levels within our schools. This leadership should focus on using data to identify as early as possible pupils who are falling behind leading to interventions designed to support their learning and wellbeing. It also necessitates that our most skilled and motivated teachers are deployed to work with these pupils using the types of teaching methods which have been identified by the Sutton Trust and others as being highly effective with disadvantaged pupils. It would be worthwhile for the Committee to take evidence from the Sutton Trust and Teach First, the charity which recruits outstanding graduates to teach in our most disadvantaged schools and which is now working in Wales, in this area. Schools need to use all of their resources to support these approaches 'bending' them towards the pupils who most need their support, rather than focusing solely on the use of the PDG, which is intended to be an additional funding source.
- The second solution that I point to above flows from the recognition that whilst schools are a necessary part of the solution to the problems we face, they are by no means sufficient. 40 years of research around the world on school effectiveness, has led to the conclusion that schools are at the very most about one third of the cause of high achievement in pupils. The Committee may want me to expand upon this point in my oral evidence. The biggest influence on young people is their parents, followed by the impact of peer groups and the place they are brought up in. This points to the importance of schools working with their parents and communities to make the sustainable and transformative difference that is needed. This is backed up by research and inspection evidence and the experience of countries around the world and in parts of the UK where the greatest progress is being made in improving equity within education and society. Again the Committee may wish me to say more on this. There are

some examples of such community-based approaches developing within Wales with Communities First, other anti-poverty programmes and the Third Sector being important within these. I would suggest that the Committee take evidence from the People and Work Unit on the work that is underway in the Glyncoch area of Pontypridd and from Communities First in the Ely area of Cardiff. This practice is almost certainly the way to bring about the step-change and the transformation that we are seeking, but it is too limited, fragile and almost random in its occurrence. I would suggest that this is a major area for consideration by the Committee.

## **2. The respective roles of the Welsh Government, education regional consortia, local authorities, schools and governing bodies in addressing this issue and why there is variation between schools in mitigating the link between poverty and educational outcomes.**

- As the Education Minister has acknowledged, whilst reducing the impact of poverty on educational achievement has been for some years one of the three national priorities of the Welsh Government, it has not received the same level of attention as improving literacy and numeracy. He has signalled his determination to rectify this and to develop a national programme. From what I have heard in outline about the programme, it seems to me to be a sensible approach which addresses most of the evidence I have pointed to above. There seems to be, however, insufficient focus on the need to develop community-based approaches, but I may be misinterpreting the very brief details that have been announced. I think it would also be desirable for the programme to be supported by a sustainable funding approach which eventually mainstreams the current PDG and that encourages schools to 'bend' all of their resources towards the pupils who need the greatest support.
- Whilst I should declare an interest, in my view the Welsh Government *Tackling Poverty Strategy* has an appropriate focus on the important role which education can play in preventing future poverty and helping people out of poverty through strengthening their chances of employment. It has also introduced appropriate indicators designed to milestone progress.
- As with the Welsh Government, the Regional Education Consortia have in my view not thus far focused nearly strongly enough on the poverty priority. With one exception, I am less sanguine that they are now beginning to address this priority with the same urgency as the Welsh Government. I could be open to challenge on this and I recognise that they are now beginning to plan future work in this area. Given the likely direction of education service delivery in Wales following the Hill Report, it

is critical that the Consortia develop robust and ambitious strategies for this priority if the progress which is required is to be made. In line with what I have argued above, I think that they should do this through partnership working with Welsh Government anti-poverty programmes, other public service agencies and the third sector. The Committee may be interested in this respect in the work of Canopi in RCT. The one Consortium where I believe progress has been made is Central South Consortium and I would suggest that the Committee take evidence from them. Again I should declare an interest, as I have been involved in this work.

- In my view the essential tasks for Consortia in addressing the poverty priority should be to challenge schools on their current performance and to support schools in developing their strategic planning and associated intervention strategies. In the latter regard the Committee may be interested in the *Achievement for All* programme. I would suggest that the Committee give close consideration to the critical role of the Consortia in taking forward the national priority.
- In relation to local authorities, I do not believe that any have an outstanding record in this area, although given the dispersed nature of poverty in Wales some are faced by considerably more challenges than others. In line with the Hill Report and the current trajectory of Welsh government policy, I do not believe it would be appropriate or realistic for twenty-two local strategies to be developed, where currently there are none. This should be the role of the Consortia, but it is essential that they work strategically with regional and local partners as suggested above.
- In respect of schools, I have already suggested above that there is good practice within the education system, but this is not widespread and there is significant variation between schools in similar circumstances. In general primary schools are more successful than secondary schools at dampening the impact of poverty. This is probably because of the way in which a single class teacher is able to focus on the needs of all low achieving pupils in class, of which FSM pupils are likely to be strongly represented. The gap in performance between FSM and non FSM pupils widens significantly in KS3 and KS4 and this is probably a result of the impact of adolescence, a less strong focus on these pupils because of the pressures of accountability around examination results and a less holistic, whole-school approach to addressing all forms of low achievement. An interesting indication of this is the evidence that FSM pupils tend to do less well in smaller numbers in more privileged schools than they do in larger groupings in our most disadvantaged schools. If the poverty gap is to be

successfully addressed all FSM pupils wherever they are located need support and all schools need to address the issue. The reasons why there are variations between schools, results from all of the complexities covered above, but leadership is a critical area. Where leaders are determined that all pupils will succeed to their potential - a characteristic often of primary schools that achieve success- it is often the case that gaps are narrow, non-existent or even positive towards FSM pupils.

- Governors should be seen as being an important factor in achieving the resolute and ambitious leadership that is required. In my experience of as a Governor and in events that I have undertaken for Governors Wales, there is significant interest in this issue. I'm not sure, however, that we are reaching all Governors and providing them with guidance on how they can best support this policy priority, or that all Governing Bodies have the expertise required to provide the leadership that is needed. Developing greater capacity across primary and secondary schools in the same area and involving Communities First and representatives of the Third Sector on all Governing Bodies would be a good step forward in this regard. The potential role of Governing Bodies within the community-based strategies suggested above could be considerable. I think this is an important and much under-developed area.

### **3. Whether Welsh Government policy sufficiently takes forward issues relating to parental engagement in respect of the educational outcomes of children from low-income households and whether it addresses the views and experiences of young children and young people from such households regarding the barriers in this regard.**

- As suggested above Welsh Government and the Minister have recognised the need to have a parental engagement strategy within the programme that the Minister has commissioned. Given the research evidence that this has the potential to be one of the most effective approaches that can be undertaken in addressing the links between poverty and education, this is encouraging. I am supplying the Committee with the report that I did for JRF summarising this evidence. Parental engagement programmes are developing in Wales at local level, within the work of communities First and notably the well regarded FAST programme which had been promoted by Save the Children. In my view we need a review of existing parental engagement programmes, a kite marking of promising programmes such as has been undertaken for parenting programmes within Flying Start and guidance on how schools and anti-poverty programmes should seek to fund parental engagement strategies. This should be followed by a wide

scale roll-out of parental engagement strategies within the plan being developed by the Department.

- It is essential that we listen to the views of young people who are experiencing poverty. Again this is probably being done but in an inconsistent and unplanned way. The Save the Children Young Researchers Project was extremely impressive. I would anticipate that the Office of the Children's Commissioner will be best placed to advise the Committee on moving forward practice in this area.

#### **4. Relevant funding issues including the effectiveness of the PDG and any anticipated effects of the recently issued guidance for 2013-2015.**

- As has been suggested above, I believe it is essential that a sustainable funding stream, which eventually main streams the PDG, be established which enables education Consortia and schools to develop a long-term strategy to address the national priority. This should include a formula that more strongly aligns funding to disadvantage at school level and which requires schools to bend their use of funding to support the needs of their most disadvantaged pupils.
- It is probably too soon to comment definitively on the use of the PDG. The Welsh Government have commissioned an independent evaluation and presumably Estyn will also be asked to undertake work in this area. Unpublished research that I undertook in two local authority areas in a Year 1 of the funding suggested that whilst there were some examples of potentially promising interventions, in most cases the spending did not draw upon inspection and research evidence, was insufficiently focused on FSM pupils and was unlikely to lead to clearly identifiable outcomes that could be monitored. I have heard anecdotal evidence from other areas of Wales which suggest similar concerns. There is a risk, therefore, that as with the RAISE funding, this additional resource will not be used as effectively as it could be to address the national priority and possibly that in many cases the money will have been used to make up for shortfalls in other areas of school budgets. If this proves to be the case, it will be a completely unacceptable situation.
- How can this be addressed? I'm not convinced that issuing Guidance is the answer and I follow those who have valued the Pupil premium in England in coming to this conclusion. My suggestion is that schools should be allowed to come to their own decisions about funding, subject to formal approval of their plans by their Governing Body and Consortia. Thereafter

they should be offered support in undertaking the funded interventions and be made subject to greater accountability in relation to outcomes. The support should be through clear and accessible signposting of what works in overcoming the impact of poverty ( based on inspection and research evidence) and a bank of effective practice case-studies. The accountability should be through FSM performance having a stronger influence in school banding outcomes for primary and secondary schools and within the Current and future Estyn inspection frameworks.

**5. The costs associated with education (trips, uniforms, sporting equipment) and the effectiveness of the Welsh Government's approach in ensuring that children from low-income households are not disadvantaged in this regard.**

- This is clearly a key area for mitigating the effects of poverty on children. Whilst I am not well placed to offer the Committee evidence here, I would suggest, however, that as there is little evidence that such meritorious responses actually lead to improvements in pupil achievement, that schools should be encouraged to use regular funding streams in this area and not the PDG.

**6. Issues relevant to free school meals within this context, such as take-up rates, the perceived stigma of claiming free school meals, the use of free school meals as a proxy indicator for child poverty and the impact of the need to revise eligibility criteria arising from the introduction of Universal Credit.**

- Free schools meals are not a perfect indicator of poverty, but they are the best we have. Others will be better placed than I am to offer the Committee evidence in this important area. One further point here which builds on evidence I have offered above: schools are generally more effective when they focus on tackling low achievement, rather than exclusively focusing on FSM pupils. By doing this they will intervene with the majority of FSM pupils. Some FSM pupils, of course, will not be low achievers.