National Assembly for Wales

Children and Young People Committee

EO 12

Inquiry into Educational Outcomes for Children from Low Income   Households

Evidence from : Estyn

The National Assembly for Wales's Children and Young People Committee is considering undertaking an inquiry into **Educational Outcomes for Children from Low Income Households**. As part of its inquiry, the Committee is undertaking a consultation to gather evidence that will inform its work.

Estyn welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence for this inquiry. Our response is set out below for the questions asked. The responses draw largely on Estyn's recent thematic reports:

- Working together to tackle poverty – September 2013
- Annual Report of HMCI - 2011-2012
- Effective practice in tackling poverty and disadvantage in schools - November 2012
- Tackling poverty and disadvantage in schools: working with the community and other services - July 2011
- Good practice in parental involvement, Estyn, 2009

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;**

   The poverty gap has not closed appreciably over recent years, despite additional grant funding and initiatives such as RAISE. Additional funding intended for supporting disadvantaged pupils is often used to raise achievement generally (boosting pupils' literacy skills for all those pupils below a certain skill level etc), rather than to tackle the specific needs of disadvantaged pupils (cultural, social, financial etc) and to focus on these particular issues for free school meals pupils. Many schools do not treat these grants as separate from other elements of their funding, but as an extension to normal funding streams. Hence the pupils who directly benefit from this additional funding are not always those from poorer backgrounds. This is often because many schools do not do enough to monitor the progress of pupils from poorer backgrounds, and there are no national benchmarks and national targets for outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. *(Annual Report of HMCI 2011-2012)*

   Through work to address Welsh Government priorities, many authorities use a broader approach to identify their disadvantaged learners and use this information to develop good strategies and approaches that aim to overcome the barriers to

learning faced by disadvantaged learners. In a few cases, they have studied the relationship that school attendance has with benefit claims, crime and unemployment, for example, to give them a better understanding of the issues related to poverty in their communities.

Generally, different services within a local authority do not align their plans or performance indicators for tackling poverty. This means that it is difficult to measure the progress of strategies for partnership working or the impact of this work. A few local authorities have been successful in bringing together service plans for education, youth, and social services to develop a comprehensive strategy for tackling poverty. They have produced an integrated plan that provides a co-ordinated approach to delivering services and avoiding duplication.

Although local authorities have an increasing focus on tackling the impact of poverty and disadvantage, only a few have improved the standards and wellbeing of disadvantaged learners.

The few local authorities that are effective in raising the standards and wellbeing of disadvantaged learners take a preventative approach to tackling poverty. They start with a thorough needs-analysis that identifies the nature and extent of the impact of deprivation on local families. By mapping the needs of disadvantaged families in this way, the local authority can share intelligence with schools and partners as well as providing a baseline from which to measure the effectiveness of new initiatives.

Although many local authorities are improving joint working, they do not always share information about disadvantaged learners with other agencies and services and this is a barrier to progress. Different services compile their own lists of disadvantaged children and young people. A few local authorities are working towards a single, more comprehensive database for information on learners and groups of learners. This would enable all staff to gain a full picture of the needs of individual learners.

In the last two years, many schools have become more focused on the outcomes of their disadvantaged learners. The PDG, the SEG, the Estyn inspection framework, and the Welsh Government data packs have all contributed to schools' awareness of the need to develop their data and tracking systems.

The introduction of the Pupil Deprivation Grant has helped schools to introduce a range of strategies to raise the standards and wellbeing of disadvantaged learners. In many schools, the Grant is used to raise the achievement of all lower-ability learners and not specifically directed towards disadvantaged learners although the spend will still benefit them if they are low-achieving. In these schools, Pupil Deprivation Grant spending shortcomings are similar to those that Estyn identified in relation to RAISE funding in the past.

The recent introduction in February 2013, of the Communities First Pupil Deprivation Grant Match Fund has the potential to build closer links between schools and their communities in the areas of highest deprivation across Wales. However, it is too early to see the impact of this work.

In general, it is difficult to evaluate WG initiatives on children's outcomes as there are often no clear targets/aims and it is even more difficult to attribute progress to one initiative if a school has many.

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;**

Each school is now visited by a consortium system leader to support and challenge the school. While a majority of schools found this support useful when looking at the performance data of groups of learners and individuals, no schools in our recent survey on working together to tackle poverty had received support or advice from their system leader about inclusion matters, multi-agency working, or specifically about tackling the issues of poverty and disadvantage. It is unclear whether system leaders have a good enough understanding of the role played by different services in the local authority to help improve the performance of disadvantaged learners.

Local authorities are now more clearly focused on tackling the impact of poverty and disadvantage. However, only a few are successfully improving the standards and wellbeing of disadvantaged learners. The few that are effective in raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners take a preventative approach to tackling poverty. They anticipate need and intervene early. These authorities gather evidence to inform the actions they take, with other partners, to address issues of poverty, and provide a baseline from which to measure the impact of these actions.

A few local authorities are making good progress in bringing together plans across local authority services to develop a stronger, more comprehensive strategy for tackling poverty and disadvantage. However, many local authorities' planning does not include specific enough objectives, measurable targets or clear lines of accountability. A majority do not involve schools well enough in their strategic planning which means that the role of schools in addressing priorities is not always well understood. The best plans have been developed through extensive consultation with a wide range of partners including families, children and young people.

A minority of authorities have specific targets and key performance indicators for narrowing the gap between the achievements of those eligible for free school meals and those who are not. These more effective authorities measure their

progress against these targets. However, many local authorities do not use this information well enough to challenge schools robustly to improve outcomes for disadvantaged learners.

Although many local authorities are developing their partnerships to improve joint working, information sharing about disadvantaged learners is still not effective enough. In many local authorities this is a barrier to progress.

The link between disadvantage and educational underachievement is still strong. In general, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds do not achieve as well as their peers. Most schools still fail to target support specifically at disadvantaged learners, particularly those who attain at average or above average levels. Schools are better at identifying and supporting low performing learners, whether they are disadvantaged or not.

Only a few schools have effective mechanisms to identify and target support to disadvantaged learners. These learners include those eligible for free school meals, those from minority groups, such as looked-after and gypsy traveller children, and those identified as being in need of additional support by the school's pastoral system or by services working with the school.

Most schools do not use their assessment and tracking systems well enough to identify the specific needs of disadvantaged learners or to monitor their progress. Most local authorities are beginning to analyse data to identify trends and patterns in the progress made by learners who are eligible for free school meals.

The few schools that support their disadvantaged learners well analyse data rigorously to plan and implement systematic, whole-school approaches for supporting disadvantaged learners. They have tailored the curriculum to meet the needs of all learners and have raised the achievement of disadvantaged learners by providing effective skills-based teaching and activities that support individual learners, such as mentoring or help with basic skills and homework.

Only a few schools plan explicitly to raise disadvantaged learners' aspirations. Although learners are offered a range of out-of-hours learning in many schools, only in the few best examples are these extra activities carefully designed to increase learners' confidence, motivation and self-esteem. Where schools have had the greatest impact on raising learners' achievement, staff plan out-of-hours learning to match the needs of learners and to complement the curriculum.

The few schools that are successful in raising the achievement of their disadvantaged learners have good systems of communication between partners. They focus on the individual needs of each learner and co-ordinate effectively the interventions by a range of agencies to ensure that the learners' needs are met in an holistic way.

The few schools that are effective in raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners have identified senior members of staff who co-ordinate and develop well the schools' work with its external partners.

In the most effective schools, the work of external agencies and services is monitored carefully by measuring learners' performance. These schools use their data systems to evaluate the impact of this work. They also share school performance information with external partners to ensure that school approaches are consistent with partners' intervention strategies.

Schools that are involved in Team Around the Family (TAF) approaches are very positive about this work and its potential for making effective multi-agency working more achievable. Many schools reported positive outcomes for the learners who had been supported through this approach. However, a minority of schools in our recent survey identified common issues of organisation with the TAF model in their schools, such as ensuring full attendance in meetings, or reporting procedures.

The challenge for schools is to co-ordinate and manage the work of several external partners. The few schools that are effective in raising the standards and wellbeing of disadvantaged learners identify a senior member of staff to co ordinate their work with its partners. These schools have a good understanding of the support that the learner is receiving, outside the school or provided by an external partner and they monitor progress carefully.

Schools in challenging circumstances that raise the achievement of disadvantaged learners do what all successful schools do to secure the achievement of learners. In addition, they also create an outstandingly positive ethos that allows disadvantaged learners to achieve well. These schools employ strategies specifically to combat the factors that disadvantage learners. Effective schools in challenging circumstances:

a) take a whole-school, strategic approach to tackling disadvantage – they have a structured, coherent and focused approach to raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners;
b) use data to track the progress of disadvantaged learners – they gather information from a range of sources and use it to analyse the progress of groups of learners;
c) focus on the development of disadvantaged learners' literacy and learning skills;
d) develop the social and emotional skills of disadvantaged learners – they understand the relationship between wellbeing and standards and often restructure their pastoral care system to deal more directly with the specific needs of disadvantaged learners;
e) improve the attendance, punctuality and behaviour of disadvantaged learners – they have suitable sanctions, but find that reward systems work particularly

well;

f) tailor the curriculum to the needs of disadvantaged learners – they have mentoring systems that guide learners through their programmes of study and help them to plan their own learning pathways;

g) make great efforts to provide enriching experiences that more advantaged learners take for granted – they offer a varied menu of clubs, activities and cultural and educational trips;

h) listen to disadvantaged learners and provide opportunities for them to play a full part in the school's life – they gather learners' views about teaching and learning, give learners a key role in school development, and involve learners directly to improve standards;

i) engage parents and carers of disadvantaged learners – they communicate and work face-to-face to help them and their children to overcome barriers to learning; and

j) develop the expertise of staff to meet the needs of disadvantaged learners – they have a culture of sharing best practice, provide opportunities for teachers to observe each other, and have performance management targets that are related to raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners.

"Schools with high proportions of pupils entitled to free schools meals tend not to perform as well as those with pupils from more advantaged backgrounds, but there are schools that are exceptions. Of the five secondary schools with excellent performance inspected this year, three have about a quarter or more of their pupils entitled to free schools meals and these pupils perform well. This is because the schools concerned take a whole-school, strategic approach to tackling disadvantage.

A common feature of these schools is strong leadership. Strong headteachers lead a structured, coherent and focused approach to closing the poverty gap by developing the expertise of staff, strengthening community links and engaging parental support. Most teachers say that engaging parents is a key factor in tackling the under-achievement of disadvantaged learners." (***Annual Report of HMCI 2011-2012)***

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 children and young people from such households regarding the barriers in this regard;**

Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds have parents who are less likely to be involved in their children's education and are more likely to have a negative perception of school and education.

Our report on parental involvement in primary schools (Good practice in parental involvement, Estyn, 2009) showed that establishing closer links between home and school has a significant impact on learners' wellbeing. Even schools who are effective in raising the achievement of their disadvantaged learners find that

engaging parents is a huge challenge. However, the most effective schools constantly strive to find better ways to forge partnerships with parents.

Many schools in challenging areas are developing their approaches to working with parents. Even schools that succeed in raising the achievement of their disadvantaged learners find that engaging parents is a challenge. Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to have parents who are less likely to be involved in their education and more likely to have a negative perception of education. Many schools also find that parents do not want to engage with services and agencies that could help them and they work hard to build a trusting relationship with parents. They keep parents well-informed about the range of services, and create opportunities for parents to liaise with these support systems in a welcoming environment.

Successful schools use a range of methods to communicate with parents. They make sure that newsletters, information on the school website, and leaflets about school life and work are produced in a variety of accessible forms. They use text-messaging and social networking websites to contact parents. The schools that are best at engaging parents also monitor the success of the strategies they use, for example by tracking hits on its school website and surveying parents on a regular basis to canvass their views.

However, these successful schools find that the best way to engage with their parents is to communicate and work with them face-to-face. These schools do more than simply have an 'open door' policy. For example, in primary schools, senior leaders and members of staff deliberately plan to meet parents at the beginning and end of the school day.

Many schools in challenging areas have found that holding meetings between parents and external agencies, for example social services, in the school helps parents to feel more at ease and doing this has had a positive impact on attendance by parents at these meetings. Social services also benefit from this arrangement as it gives social workers access to the school's data on the individual learner.

A number of successful schools and their external partners have worked together to re-design the school as a 'hub' for a range of services. By hosting clinics, drop-in centres and meeting rooms on the school site, schools and agencies such as counselling services, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHs), and the health service have found that they have improved working relationships with agencies and services. This has enabled the sharing of information and created an environment that welcomes families and learners.

A few schools employ a member of staff specifically for liaising with parents. This member of staff greets parents at the school gate every morning and encourages

parents to discuss any issues with teaching staff. This activity provides the school with valuable information about its strategies to develop partnerships with parents.

Schools often find that parents are willing to attend school events such as productions or prize-giving, but fewer parents will attend more formal sessions to discuss learning and progress. A few schools have overcome this problem by putting on events that combine entertainment provided by learners with information in giving items about how to support learners' progress.

Schools that are effective in tackling poverty and disadvantage have identified a member of the senior leadership team to take responsibility for the performance of disadvantaged learners. These leaders do not only deal with learners' special educational needs or basic skills needs, but are responsible for supporting the achievement of all disadvantaged learners across the full range of needs and abilities. This is particularly important feature of the few schools that work well with a range of partners to tackle issues of poverty and disadvantage.

4. **Relevant funding issues, including the effectiveness of the pupil deprivation grant and any anticipated effects of the recently issued guidance for 2013-2015;**

Generally, local authorities do not give enough advice to schools about how to spend their PDG. A few authorities have organised conferences and other training events to share good practice on raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners, but this is not widespread enough.

In many local authorities, the Pupil Deprivation Grant has been allocated to clusters of schools. This helps schools to pool their resources to make more cost-effective spending decisions. In Gwynedd local authority, for example, in areas where there are many small schools, the funding has been successfully pooled for professional-development training for teachers to ensure maximum impact.

A majority of local authorities provide some training and guidance on addressing poverty and disadvantage through their advice about the effective use of grant funding. However, only a few local authorities give good advice to schools about how to use their PDG money. Overall there are still too few opportunities for school leaders to learn about strategic approaches to tackle poverty, or how to plan and evaluate approaches to improving outcomes for disadvantaged learners.

The PDG has helped schools to focus on approaches to raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners. Schools are employing a range of strategies designed to improve out comes for learners. However, only in a minority of cases do these approaches focus specifically enough on the needs of individual disadvantaged learners.

In a few clusters, pooling resources has helped researchers from secondary and primary schools to understand each other's issues. A few secondary school

headteachers in our survey commented that this arrangement had raised their awareness of the importance of interventions in the early years. A few schools have designed approaches to improving outcomes for disadvantaged learners across phases through their cluster work. This has promoted effective continuity during transition from primary to secondary school in areas such as social and emotional learning and literacy.

Our recent report on INSET found that tackling poverty and disadvantage was very rarely a feature of schools' INSET programmes.

In the last two years, many schools have started analysing data on the outcomes of their disadvantaged learners. The PDG, the School Effectiveness Grant, the Estyn inspection framework, and the Welsh Government data packs have all contributed to raising managers' awareness of the need to develop their data and tracking systems.

In the best cases, schools evaluate their own work and that of external agencies against clear measures of learners' performance. These schools use data systems to evaluate the impact of new initiatives and share performance information with partners to ensure that the school's approaches are joined up with external interventions.

Many schools now monitor the progress of learners who are eligible for free school meals. A few schools also track this information to evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives. There has been an increase in the number of staff who have received training in the use of data, and in a minority of schools this has improved accountability for raising standards. The schools that are most successful in tackling poverty:

- track the progress of individuals and groups of learners;

- benchmark their progress against other schools;

- use a range of quantitative and qualitative information on learners' wellbeing and perceptions (such as the Boxall Profile or PASS);

- monitor interventions at regular intervals and review, refine or abandon strategies that do not result in improvement for learners; and

- monitor the effectiveness of teachers in improving the outcomes of individuals or groups of learners.

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

Estyn has no specific evidence for this question.

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;**

Estyn has no specific evidence for this question.

7. **Views on the Welsh Government's response in taking forward the recommendations of the Children and Young People Committee of the Third Assembly in respect of the 'Child Poverty: Eradication through Education' report*.**

It is evident that there is a growing awareness of the need to tackle poverty and disadvantage in schools and local authorities across Wales. However, practice is still much too variable.

You may also wish to submit other evidence that you feel is directly relevant to the link between poverty and educational outcomes, for example the relevance (if any) of class sizes etc

Estyn has no further evidence to submit at this time.