

The Highland Council
Education, Children and Adult Services Committee
27 August 2015

Agenda Item	16.
Report No	ECAS 62/15

Closing the Educational Attainment Gap

Report by Director of Care and Learning Service

Summary

This report summarises recent evidence on the educational attainment gap in Scotland, the complexities and challenges of addressing it and an outline plan for a Highland response.

1. Background

- 1.1 Concern about the gap in educational attainment between children from low income households and those from better off households in Scotland is not new. What is new, is the concerted effort now being made by government, local authorities, schools and communities in Scotland to address the issue. There is no shortage of evidence to back up the concern, and the new Highland Council programme includes a commitment to: “improve pupil attainment by taking focussed action in and beyond the classroom to help improve the performance of pupils, particularly those experiencing poverty and deprivation.”
- 1.2 A 2007 report by the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) www.oecd.org/edu/school/40328315.pdf into the quality and equity of schooling in Scotland provides a useful starting point. The report noted that an achievement gap was evident by P5 and opened further right through to S4. But it also noted that “*Little of the variation in student achievement in Scotland is associated with the ways in which schools differ. Most of it is connected with how children differ. Who you are in Scotland is far more important than what school you attended, so far as achievement differences in international tests are concerned. Socio-economic status is the most important difference between individuals.*” (P15). The report went on to make 18 recommendations, many of which are still relevant.
- 1.3 A 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report indicated an even stronger link between parental background and poor reading skills in Scotland than was evident in the OECD report. In 2012, a further PISA report reflected a narrowing of the attainment gap in Scotland but warned that the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on attainment was still considerable.
- 1.4 International comparisons have been followed up by educationalists visiting other countries to study their approaches to closing the attainment gap and by inviting successful practitioners to speak in Scotland. One such was Ben Levin, former deputy education minister in Ontario and professor of education at the University of Toronto, who spoke at the 2011 Scottish Learning Festival.
- 1.5 In 2003 in Ontario, achievement in literacy and numeracy had stalled; graduation rates from its high schools were in decline; there was public conflict over

education; and low morale among teachers. Professor Levin is credited with a transformational change that happened in the years that followed.

- 1.6 By 2009, literacy and numeracy achievement had improved by 13%; the number of low-performing schools had been cut by 75%; high school graduation rates had gone up from 68% to 79% - 20,000 more students per year; and the turnover of new teachers in the first four years had fallen from 32 % to 9%.
- 1.7 Professor Levin summed up his message with five clear priorities:
- have a clear strategy;
 - ground it in evidence;
 - focus on doing it;
 - get lots of feedback and adjust;
 - respect and work with partners.
- 1.8 Professor Levin's work resonated with five Scottish head teachers whose schools were known to be successful in raising attainment and whose advice led to The Scottish Government publishing **Raising Attainment** <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0039/00390201.pdf> in 2012. In response to the question of what raises attainment the report, writers recommended:
- increasing the ambition, aspiration and expectations of every child and young person;
 - delivering excellent learning and teaching in every classroom, every day;
 - developing effective leadership at all levels;
 - engaging family and wider community;
 - focusing on literacy and numeracy as platforms on which to build future learning;
 - using information intelligently to understand progress.
- 1.9 Under each bullet point in the report there are questions to help schools evaluate their effectiveness in these key areas.
- 1.10 Also in 2012, the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), as noted in the Times Education Supplement Scotland (TESS), produced a report that reached broadly the same conclusions but had more to say about some of the professional barriers to raising attainment:
- a lack of conviction that all children have the potential to achieve more, even in the face of interrupted learning and social disadvantage;
 - insufficient investment in the earliest years of a child's life;
 - insufficient consensus on "well-evidenced and well-researched leadership" that is capable of making change happen;
 - lack of consistency in implementing the most effective teaching practice in every classroom, school and authority;
 - weaknesses in some teachers' skills;
 - lack of clarity about what constitutes effective practice and lack of recognition of its impact in areas of disadvantage.
- 1.11 That report also called for improved performance management systems that draw on data beyond free school meals entitlement, for example: gender; parents' education; particularly mothers' education; prior attainment; social background; and comparisons with similar classes and schools.

- 1.12 More recently, in May 2014, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published a key document, **Closing the Attainment Gap in Scottish Education** www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/education-attainment-scotland-full.pdf. The key points are given below.
- 1.12.1 The gap between children from low-income and high-income households starts early. By age 5, it can be equivalent to 10 months (problem-solving) and 13 months (vocabulary). Lower attainment in literacy and numeracy is linked to deprivation throughout primary school. By age 12–14 (S2), pupils from better-off areas are more than twice as likely as those from the most deprived areas to do well in numeracy. Attainment at 16 (the end of S4) has risen overall, but a significant and persistent gap remains between groups.
- 1.12.2 Parental socio-economic background has more influence than the school attended.
- 1.12.3 Children from deprived households leave school earlier. Low attainment is strongly linked to destinations after school, with long-term effects on job prospects.
- 1.12.4 A range of evidence-based approaches can reduce the attainment gap. These span high-quality, pre-school education; whole-school reforms based on timely, relevant data; and closer partnerships between home and schools.
- 1.12.5 The researchers concluded that:
- Advice about developing the curriculum, improving educational outcomes for all pupils and inspecting schools should provide explicit guidance on reducing the link between poverty and attainment.
 - Lack of data, research and evaluation evidence for schools and local authorities currently hampers progress. The Scottish education community needs a national evidence base of what works and professional development in how to use evidence. This will help practitioners differentiate proven, promising and unproven approaches and inform choices about appropriate curriculum design, resource allocation and how to monitor and evaluate practice for impact.
- 1.13 In November 2014, members were brought up to date with the key points emerging from an Audit Scotland Report on School Education published in June 2014. The report assessed attainment over the last decade and identified how effectively councils had made improvements over this time. The key messages were highlighted, together with an outline of the detailed recommendations, and a strategy for how the recommendations of the report might be taken forward by the Council.
- 1.14 Specific attention was drawn to evidence that in Scotland in 2013 there was an 81% attainment gap between the lowest and highest performing schools in S4 achieving 5 awards at level 5. In Highland, the attainment gap sat at 56%. Attainment trends in Highland have improved over the last ten years and in 2013 the range and spread of performance between schools in Highland was on a level with the national average. Improvement rates have been slightly lower than the national average but this, in part, reflects Highland's slightly higher overall starting

point. It is now recognised that while deprivation is a key factor influencing pupil attainment it is not the only factor and differences in attainment, therefore, needed closer scrutiny.

2. Closing the Attainment Gap - Complexities and Challenges

- 2.1 The above range of reports is by no means exhaustive. But from the 2007 OECD report to the 2014 Audit Scotland report there is compelling evidence of a deep-rooted and pervasive gap in educational attainment that is complex and will be challenging to close. There is an inter-generational cycle of low attainment that means there can be no quick fix.
- 2.2 Some previous initiatives, such as new community schools or schools of ambition, have been short-term with short-term gains but with no trajectory of long term improvement in attainment.
- 2.3 There is a consensus that more research is needed nationally and locally. A lack of clear, focused research on the key factors in low attainment means there is less clarity / consensus on what closing the gap would look like in practice. For example what does 'parental engagement' look like in this context?
- 2.4 In addition, there is a shortage of research evidence on how well different approaches to closing the gap actually work in practice. Much 'closing the gap evidence' is broad, and based on averages, which will not be applicable in all situations. It can be difficult to transfer general messages into specific practice. Moreover, initiatives, such as Assessment is for Learning (AifL) that look to raise attainment, may lead to most learners' attainment being raised – that does not close the gap and may even widen it if specific steps are not taken to address the particular needs of children starting at a lower base of attainment.
- 2.5 The terms 'attainment' and 'achievement' are often used inter-changeably but can mean different things in different contexts. Furthermore, it is notoriously difficult to measure, or benchmark, wider achievement across a school, far less an authority or nationally.
- 2.6 When comparing attainment in its most commonly understood sense, we are dependent on SQA results as a data source. However, if it is felt that we need to be gathering and collating data much earlier, there are implications for the way standardised testing and monitoring / tracking approaches are currently used in Highland. Further discussion is also needed around whether we should be looking at attainment as measured purely by SQA exam results when so many successful adults in business, trades, creative industries, environmental organisations, agriculture, media, sports and so on achieved their success despite modest or poor school exam results. Underlying all of this may be the issue of a lack of parity of esteem between academic / vocational courses and a need to develop curriculum models that meet the needs and aspirations of all young people.
- 2.7 Any closing the gap initiatives need to recognise and address the impact of rural deprivation on attainment and, indeed, on wider achievement. Likewise, there is a need to tackle pockets of low attainment even in the most academically successful schools

2.8 Existing research points to success in closing the educational attainment gap not just being dependent on what you do but how well you do it. There are implications, therefore, for strategic planning across Care and Learning, staff training, staff deployment and resource allocation. If, as research suggests, school differences are not the most significant factor there needs to be a discussion on what an authority approach to closing the gap looks like, including who needs to be involved and consequent accountabilities

3. Closing the Attainment Gap – Identifying Solutions

3.1 Further to a report to Committee from Audit Scotland at the end of last year, officers have developed a Sub-group to develop the Highland Action Plan to close the attainment gap, and are working with schools and Head teachers on this. It was agreed that members would become involved in this process.

3.2 The initial discussions indicate that the action plan will target financial and human resources to improve the educational attainment of children living in economically disadvantaged areas; looked after children wherever they live; those in rural poverty; and those living in deprivation within more affluent catchment areas.

3.3 The plan would include a clear definition of what is meant by ‘closing the gap in attainment’ within an overall framework of raising achievement, and is likely to include:

- The appointment of Closing the Gap development officer supported by a small, core working group made up of members and officers with sub-groups to take forward specific aspects – participants to be drawn from across Care and Learning plus the third sector.
- Promoting a relentless focus on literacy, numeracy improvements to daily teaching practice, emotional literacy, raising pupil aspiration / ambition / and raising staff morale / expectations.
- Supporting the two Associated School Groups (Alness Academy and Inverness High) to achieve the agreed outcomes of their involvement in the national Raising Attainment for All project.
- Sharing successful strategies eg build on existing successes such as Speedy Readers.
- Adopting an ‘only the best will do’ when appointing all staff in schools that have the greatest challenges in terms of closing the attainment gap.
- Continuing to promote wider achievement and seek ways to capture and celebrate its positive impact on learners’ life chances.
- Carrying out further research, for example -
 - with recent school leavers not in employment or training (a follow up to work carried out by educational psychologist James McTaggart and colleagues 5 / 6 years ago) on why school did not work for them
 - with parents of pre-school, primary and secondary children about the

barriers they perceive to engagement with pre-school and primary / secondary

- on what can be learned from earlier initiatives that would benefit from being set into a longer term framework
- on why levels of attainment vary between different schools and different groups within schools in Highland
- on reliable, accessible strategies for school staff to deploy
- how family teams and integrated teams could best be deployed in a closing the gap context – including ensuring priorities and accountabilities
- on what effective early intervention and nurture groups – both seen as crucial – actually look like in practice
- on what ongoing training staff will need.

4. **Scottish Government – The Attainment Challenge**

- 4.1 In addition, the Scottish Government has now set out an ‘attainment challenge’, to close the attainment gap across Scotland, and this activity will be built into the Highland action plan.
- 4.2 The Raising Attainment for All Programme was launched in June 2014, to support consistent improvement in attainment and achievement through the development of a collaborative learning system which supports the implementation of improvement methodology and enables shared learning across the country. The programme has adopted the Model for Improvement methodology, which is based on the 3-Step Improvement Framework for Scotland’s Public Services. Schools in Alness and Inverness are participating in direct activity as part of this work.
- 4.3 A new £100 million national (over four years) fund has also been created to improve educational outcomes. This will be targeted initially at schools in the local authorities with the biggest concentrations of households in deprived areas. It will focus on improving literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing in primary schools in these areas. National and local partners will work together to identify the specific work that can be implemented successfully in classrooms and which will have a significant impact on the attainment of children from deprived communities.
- 4.4 A bespoke improvement plan, appropriate to local circumstances, will be agreed for each school or cluster of schools. This will include an agreement to gather, in a proportionate way, the data that will be required to measure the impact of the interventions supported.
- 4.5 While the initial announcements focussed on schools in seven central belt authorities, this is about to be extended to a further 57 schools, including 5 in Highland: Merkinch, Bishop Eden, Coulhill, Milton and South Wick.
- 4.6 There will be a network established across these 57 schools, also including any cluster schools that are deemed appropriate. The funding and network are

intended to help them progress local improvement plans to raise attainment, with a focus on literacy, numeracy and wellbeing.

- 4.7 In addition, the Scottish Government are appointing Attainment Advisors in every authority. The Directors of each of the authorities in the north of Scotland have agreed to work together regarding this. They believe that if this is to be effective, one Attainment Advisor should be appointed with a coordinating role across the north, to drive forward the work of the attainment advisory team and also report back to Directors on progress being made in terms of meeting agreed objectives and outcomes.
- 4.8 This coordinator will oversee the work of four main workstreams, which could be led by other attainment advisors with input as appropriate from local authority teams and from school staff. The four workstreams agreed by Directors are;
1. Raising Attainment in small schools - focusing on curriculum design and impact
 2. Early Years Literacy
 3. Early Years Numeracy
 4. Addressing Rural Deprivation

5. Implications

- 5.1 **Resources:** Other than the additional funding identified above, there is no new money available to close the attainment gap. Rather, it is necessary to ensure existing resources are used to their optimum.
- 5.2 There are no **legal, risk** or specific **climate change / carbon clever** implications.
- 5.3 **Rural/Gaelic:** This paper seeks to ensure an improvement in the equality of opportunities afforded to all children and young people in Highland regardless of where they live. All agreed initiatives would be equally applicable to English medium and Gaelic medium schools and classes.

6. Recommendation

- 6.1 Committee is asked to note and comment on the research summaries and the deep-seated factors that underlie the attainment gap presented in this report and to comment on the actions that are proposed.

Designation: Director of Care and Learning

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