

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Education, Culture and Sport
DATE	2 June 2011
DIRECTOR	Annette Bruton
TITLE OF REPORT	Closing the Gap
REPORT NUMBER:	ECS/11/040

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

The report provides an overview of the key factors associated with underachievement and the gap between the highest and lowest performers in attainment.

2. RECOMMENDATION(S)

It is recommended that Committee:

1. notes the content of the report.
2. instructs officers to develop a policy on raising achievement which sets out the approaches to be taken in schools and across services to reduce the gap in attainment.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are none at this stage. Following the development of a strategy to raise standards and achievement resources may need to be re-targeted.

4. BACKGROUND/MAIN ISSUES

- 4.1 At its meeting on 20 January 2001, the Committee considered a report on performance which contained data on the gap in educational attainment of between the highest and lowest attainers. The Committee instructed officers to bring back a further report on the gap between the lowest attaining 20% and the highest attaining 20% of pupils and to include any lessons learned from how other local authorities had tackled the problem.
- 4.2 This report sets out the key factors that can impact positively to close the gap in attainment and achievement. It draws on the work of other local authorities as well as research in Scotland, the UK and more widely.

- 4.3 Closing or narrowing the gap in educational attainment is a stubborn problem not only in Aberdeen but across Scotland and in other countries. A country wide review of Scottish education carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and published in 2007 recognised that improving educational attainment and employment outcomes was a strong priority within Scottish education. There have been various policy interventions in place over the last two decades which have sought to address these complicated and long standing problems.
- 4.4 The underlying causes of inequality in attainment and achievement are complex. One in four children in Scotland is growing up in poverty. By the age of three children living in poverty can be up to a year behind other children in their learning. An achievement gap associated with deprivation opens up about Primary 5. This gap continues to widen throughout secondary school. A report by the Rowntree Foundation shows that only 14 per cent of variation in students' performance can be put down to school quality, most is explained by factors in the home and community. The attitudes and aspirations of both children and parents seem to be key in breaking the link between poverty and attainment. This therefore requires us to look at the context in which children grow up and the opportunities that will be open to them.
- 4.5 As yet no single approach has solved this problem for our children and young people. Given this affects at least one quarter of the pupils in our schools across Scotland it is a major challenge. The children affected are not just in schools in very deprived areas, they are scattered across the country.
- 4.6 Schools can and do make a difference. Schools have been found to narrow the gap in attainment for vulnerable groups. There is no single factor which reduces the gap but a number of approaches taken together can have a significant effect. In some instances attainment has been improved across all pupils and therefore the gap has not been narrowed but all have benefited equally. Providing work-related opportunities for low attainers can lead to overall improved attainment and greater likelihood of continuing in education and training post 16. Where schools have reduced bullying and improved behaviour this can improve the achievement of vulnerable learners. Activities such as pupil decision making, effective pastoral care and out of school learning can improve outcomes. Improving approaches to learning and teaching can have a significant effect on the attainment of all learners. The involvement of parents and children in interventions has been shown to have a beneficial effect on outcomes, both for vulnerable groups and the whole school population. When combined with work with families and in communities and where

the intervention is early enough to make a difference there can be quite marked improvements.

4.7 Groups of pupils most at risk of missing out include:

- Looked after and accommodated children
- Children with additional support needs, including emotional and behavioural difficulties
- Children who experience barriers to their achievement because of their race, gender, disability or health
- Children experiencing homelessness
- Young carers

5 In Aberdeen City we are already putting in place a number of approaches designed to maximise the achievement of all our young people. In developing a strategy for raising standards and raising achievement for Aberdeen we would propose to include and develop advice and guidance on the following priorities :

- Continuing to develop a curriculum for excellence which provides flexibility and which works with families and communities as well as children and young people;
- Develop our early intervention approaches with children and their families;
- Develop our partnerships with local employers to provide innovative learning opportunities;
- Improving learning and teaching ;
- Improve transitions from nursery to primary school and from primary to secondary school;
- Develop a personal learning approach for children and for adult learners in families;
- Develop classroom approaches which are differentiated to meet learners needs;
- Develop integrated working practices throughout our services which support our most vulnerable and disadvantaged families;
- Place parents, as the primary educator at the centre of our partnership approaches;
- Promote health and well being for children and their families;
- Continue to develop family learning approaches to support children from a very early age; and
- Developing a multi-agency approach to providing service and using resources based on the findings of the Total Place work being carried out in the north of the City.

6. In order to achieve this we will need to:

- Target resources at priority areas of need;
- Support achievement for all pupils;

- Ensure our management information system provides reliable information on attainment and achievement to enable us to act quickly ; and
- Ensure we have a range of provision to meet the needs of our learners.

7. A study by the Rowntree Foundation found that that children of similar ability and backgrounds have better test scores by 11 years-old if:

- they believe they can affect their own lives, believe in their own ability and believe that school is important;
- they are not struggling with behaviour problems or being bullied;
- their mother wants them to go to university and believes in her own ability to affect her life.

This study points up the key importance of placing the child at the centre but working with children, within families, within their communities.

8. Officer propose to develop a policy and strategy outlining in more detail how we will seek to reduce the gap in achievement building on the key approaches set out in sections 6 and 7. This strategy will be built in to the 5 year service improvement plan which will come to the next committee cycle.

9. IMPACT

This report is likely to be of interest to the public. It will affect those with children and those working in schools. It will also be of interest to those involved in lifelong learning and to other public provider partners.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Report to Education, Culture and Sport Committee, 20 January 2011

11. REPORT AUTHOR DETAILS

Annette Bruton
Director, Education, Culture and Sport
abruton@aberdeencity.gov.uk
01224 523458