

Closing the Gap - Social Deprivation and Links to Educational Attainment Inquiry

PAC Visit to Belfast Boys' Model

The Public Accounts Committee visited Belfast Boys' Model School on 4 November as part of its inquiry into 'Closing the Gap– Social Deprivation and links to Educational Attainment. The Committee met pupils from Year 14 Politics class and Year 8 Wellbeing Class and spoke to a panel of teachers made up of Principal Mary Montgomery and Vice Principals Dawn Farquhar, Olwen Black and Judith McCracken.



1. Key areas of support for school children

Principal Mary Montgomery explained how the Boys' Model School is using funding to close the gap in educational attainment and social deprivation, outlining strategies to tackle three key areas of deficit:

1a. Lack of guidance, support and resources at home.

- Select Teaching and non-teaching members of staff act as Learning Support Mentors, providing support and guidance with personal organisation, coursework, managing deadlines and balancing workload.
- The school now provides laptops and printers to pupils in need.

1b. Mental Health

- The school employs a full-time youth worker, partly funded with the community, through a partnership with Street Beat Voluntary Youth (a registered charity working to help young people fulfil their potential, whilst responding to their need for support and guidance).

- The provision of a school counsellor in each year group
- Wellbeing periods have been integrated into pupils' weekly class timetable this year. For example, the Committee was able to get involved in a wellbeing class with year 8 pupils. This was co-ordinated by Streetbeat Voluntary Youth Service support workers. Pupils said these classes teach them about positive affirmations, how to handle stress, develop coping mechanisms and build self-confidence. Pupils also complete crafts and gardening as part of this class, and have plans to invite a local pensioners group to the school for afternoon tea using some of their produce.
- Preventative measures are used to tackle social disadvantage. For example, each incoming Year 8 pupil receives a home visit from the school staff to help identify potential issues early on. Other preventative measures, include ways of dealing with potential isolation, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. If detected by teachers, the school will signpost children to community programmes, such youth clubs or mentoring programmes to help reduce mental ill health. A preventative curriculum is delivered during timetabled time.
- Older boys are able to train as Well-being and Anti-bullying ambassadors to support their peers.



Committee Members observing a Year 8 Wellbeing class

1c. Social Capital

The third major deficit is social capital, particularly in the development of skills. The school noticed that pupils, whilst attaining qualifications, were lacking in key employability skills. To address this, the school has an Enrichment programme, for Years 12-14, which provides opportunities to children that do not have the same level of exposure to sport, volunteering and leadership experiences, that other children might have. In addition, there are extra curricular programmes which run at lunchtime and afterschool. The aim of the programme is to enable pupils to build essential employability skills in areas such as leadership, organisational skills, resilience, initiative and communication skills. This is regarded as essential for higher level apprenticeships.

Through these initiatives, the school strives to build synergy between the curriculum and the pastoral aspects of school life that ultimately help pupils to upskill and build relationships.

2. Closing the Gap Funding

In addition to main school budget, the school receives the following funding:

2a. TSN Funding

The Budget for Targeting Social Need (TSN) is £714,040 which equates to £662 per pupil. The Principal explained that TSN funding is very heavily regulated and a TSN planner was introduced in 2018. It is a mechanism, required by the Department for Education, for school principals to indicate how TSN funding is being allocated across personnel, resources and community engagement.

The School Principal pointed out that, as a result of budget constraints in many schools, TSN funding is seen as a top up to pay for other services instead of being spent on what it is intended for. However, in Boys Model, it is allocated in accordance with the aims of the funding and accounted for through the TSN planner. The Principal explained that schools are encouraged to complete the planner which outlines how the funding is being spent. However, Ms Montgomery said DE figures have revealed that only 6% of schools in Northern Ireland submitted TSN planner returns. In discussion with Members, the following reasons were cited for why there was a lack of compliance in completing the planner as follows:

- Lack of understanding of what TSN funding is intended for;
- Absence of training to help schools identify the causes and manifestation of social need;
- Lack of training and experience in financial management for school principals

2b. Full Service Extended Schools Programme

Boys' Model has a Full Service Extended Schools Programme. Linked closely with the Extended Schools Programme, the 'full service' approach goes beyond standard extended school provision by delivering substantial additional programmes and activities aimed at tackling barriers to learning and raising levels of educational attainment for those pupils in the greatest need. The fund is also heavily regulated. The school is funded, close to £200,000, under this programme which aims to provide additional, specialist counselling, attendance support and parenting support. It is monitored and accounted for by action plans and annual reports to the Department for Education

2c. Engage Funding

The School also received £52,000 in Engage Funding this year. This programme provides an extra level of support to schools to manage pupil's learning. It has been designed to limit any long-term adverse impact, resulting from COVID-19 lockdowns, on educational standards. It aims to do this by supporting pupils' learning and engagement on their return to school through provision of high quality, one to one, small group, or team teaching support in every school in Northern Ireland. It is also heavily regulated and is accounted for in the same way as TSN through the use of an Engage Planner.

2d. Special Education Needs (SEN)

The school has a high level of Statemented pupils, 119 of a pupil population of 1079. These figures reflect that four times as many boys are statemented compared to girls

in the school system. In addition to statemented pupils, there are pupils that need additional support, that have gone undiagnosed or who are experiencing short term trauma. These pupils are supported through a bespoke 'package' of support, funded by EA, in the region of £800,000.

The Principal pointed out that SEN funding is not incorporated into the school budget and is paid for directly by the Education Authority (EA). The principal does not account for this money, other than to provide data on the number of SEN teachers/CLAs that are employed.

The school has negotiated this 'package' with EA regarding how SEN funding for classroom assistants is used. The Boys' Model School has instead used this funding to employ additional specialist teachers to support SEN pupils, as opposed to using it for additional classroom assistants. The school has found this to be more effective as it targets SEN provision where it is most needed. It allows the school more flexibility to place pupils in specialist classes as a short term measure, if required. There is an Access class, primarily for statemented pupils, and a Progress class for pupils that are either undiagnosed or that the school has identified as needing extra support due to complex needs. This has allowed better access to the school curriculum and has had a 'transformative impact' on results for SEN pupils. Within the Boys' Model 72% of SEN pupils achieve 3 A-Levels at A*-C grades, compared to the Northern Ireland average of 16%.

The Principal, however said that, despite this funding there was still a shortfall and that the need for classroom assistants was increasing.

3. School performance and attainment outcomes

Examination Results have been very positive for the school. A number of years ago the School removed all Entry level or Level 1 qualifications which had limited progression routes and now its focus is on meaningful qualifications. As a non-selective school, it is benchmarked against 5A*-C GCSEs. The majority of boys get 7 GCSEs as illustrated by the GCSE Value Added Table 2020-2021 (see Annexe 1) which compares predicted grades of pupils with actual grades for all pupils, those in receipt of free school meals, and SEN pupils.

4. ISSUES

In the course of the visit, the following issues were identified by the School.

4.1 Short term funding

Whilst the school receives a variety of pots of funding, the school explained that short term funding is not a good model for schools. It makes it difficult to plan in a manner which enables the funding to be embedded in the school for long-term goals. Sustainable funding, as opposed to short term funding, is what the school would benefit most from.

4.2 Leadership support

There is limited support in the development of school leaders and some creativity is needed to support leaders, with bespoke solutions for schools, particularly in the area of finance. There is also limited training on vision and strategy for leaders within the specific context of their school. The Principal is encouraged that more training support has been recommended by the Fair Start Panel and believes that some progress is starting to be made in this area.

4.3 Lack of joined up government

There is a lack of joined up government which has hindered the school to run as a full services extended school since 2006, particularly in the areas of health and education. The principal, however, did say that there were 'Greenshoots' of hope as a result of initiative during the pandemic. It is her hope that cohesion can continue, not just in health and education but across other departments such as Communities, Justice and Health.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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