Malone College
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Context

Malone College is an integrated school straddling South and West Belfast. It has 66% FSME and students attend from a variety of backgrounds, including: 28% newcomer students, white working class boys/girls, Roma, Somali, Syrian and many other nationalities and groups are represented at Malone. **Some of the most marginalised communities are represented at the school.** The school has a vibrant learning community with high expectations and the value-added data for 2015/2016 shows that 75% of students attain above their expected grades in English and Maths, adding significant value to their learning experience.

I think it is important to state that the school has had positive engagement sessions with DE personnel in the Improvements and Standards Team and also within ETI in relation to the fairness and equity of some aspects of policy and practice and also in relation for the need for the school to be driving school improvement.

What Are We Measuring?

Malone would argue that in order to investigate educational underachievement **we need to establish a common definition of educational underachievement.** It is important to distinguish between low levels of attainment versus low levels of achievement.
What is educational underachievement? How can we tackle it if we do not have a clear consensus or if there is a varying opinion as to what actually constitutes educational underachievement?

HOW CAN WE MEASURE SUCCESS IN A MANNER WHICH IS FAIR, CONSISTENT AND REPRESENTATIVE OF THE STUDENTS' STARTING POINT AND THE CONTEXT OF THE SCHOOL AND THE AREA?

The current measurement system is rigid and has a strong focus on achievement outcomes as opposed to progress. Can we compare a Catholic boys' school with 66% Free School Meals Entitlement with a school that has students that arrive never having attended primary school, or students arriving unable to speak any English? Can we expect the same outcomes? Is it equitable and fair that we expect the same outcomes?

In order to address educational attainment, we need to undertake a range of strategies:

- Establish a strategic approach to tackling underachievement linking the communities, primary schools, post-primaries and all the stakeholders.
- Have a purposeful strategy for sharing best practice among schools and place successful leaders/ teachers in schools with high challenge, with financial enumerations to reflect this.

- Continue to provide opportunities as Associate Assessors within ETI to up-skill educationalists and build capacity. In addition to this, the process could be opened to involve leaders within underperforming schools and allow them to avail of some of the sessions also.

- Establish a leadership network programme at governmental level to facilitate leadership development.

- Continue to direct funding in areas of need to facilitate the challenges and enable targeted intervention.

- Ensure that as many students are included within in a schools' data in a manner which is fair and consistent across all schools to ensure an equal playing field.

- Implement an early years' intervention programme in areas of social need which supports and engages parents.

- Ensure that educators DENI/ ETI and policymakers are receiving appropriate professional development opportunities that enable those professionals to understand and evaluate the range of challenges within a school and the context of the school.

- Develop a fair and consistent dashboard of measurement which allows schools to be measured fairly and in the context of the challenges they face. Value added data must have a place in a school analysis of achievements and standards.

- **Establish a " Hard to place student policy" similar to councils in the UK, so that students are not moved from school to school and so that schools with space and high challenge do not become "sinking schools" overloaded with challenge. This system is unfair and can exacerbate levels of underachievement in some areas, lessen resources and impact the wellbeing and moral in a school. It is also ethically unfair that the school subsumes the issues and challenges of the "hard to place student" when their initial school then ceases to have any responsibility for the student.**

- Review the impact of school selection process (transfer test) on social cohesion, educational underachievement, educational attainment and pupil wellbeing.

- Treat schools with marginalised communities equitably**. Members of the Roma/ Irish travelling community**- members within these communities in mainstream education present a range of different challenges. It is important that there is dispensation given to schools with a large concentration of these particular students, especially when in some cases their predisposition to learning does not necessarily begin with an initial attendance at school on a regular basis.

The **Summary of Annual Examination Results (SAER)** criteria does not allow for students from ethnic minority backgrounds arriving with minimal or no formal education or language acquisition. In England the students can be excluded from their data with suitable evidence provided. This needs to be addressed in terms of equity as Educational research undertaken by Cummins (2000) states:

"*it takes between 5-7 years for a child to be working on a level with native speakers as far as academic language is concerned…………….. We should not assume that non-native speakers who have attained a high degree of fluency and accuracy in everyday spoken English have the corresponding academic language proficiency.*"

Solutions

1. The development of a new policy for Newcomers (DE name for ethnic minority students). This has not been updated since 2008. Ensure that the policy includes pastoral guidance and strategic agency involvement to prevent overlap of support and provision.
2. The establishment of a common definition of educational underachievement
3. The formulation of a fair and equitable dashboard of measurement for schools that takes into consideration context and a range of measurements with a focus on progression and value added
4. The establishment of a hard to place policy which straddles all schools, to ensure students are not placed from school to school, overloading some with challenge, leading to sinking schools. **The current use of ARTICLE 42 (1997) ORDER by the Department of Education & the Education Authority and it's concentration on schools with capacity and high challenge is unfair and needs revaluated.**
5. Greater sharing of best practice and up-skilling of leaders in challenging schools through closer training opportunities with ETI
6. Compulsory professional development for DE and ETI which up-skills and prepared them for emerging changes within education-newcomers, new practices in improving pedagogy etc.
7. An educational review of the impact on the NI selection policy on the academic, social and emotional wellbeing of young people.
8. Review the current Educational Welfare system and identify consistent strategies across the Education Authority that can impact attendance rates. Many of the services are under-resourced, cannot meet the demands and different jurisdictions have varying penalties for parental non-adherence to sending their children to school.

I would be keen to present to the committee on the issues raised and discuss possible solutions going forward. I would also like to take this opportunity to formally invite the committee to Malone at any stage to view the wide range of practices in existence to tackle underachievement positively.

Maire Thompson

Principal
Malone College