



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR EDUCATION**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Inquiry into Successful Post-Primary
Schools Serving Disadvantaged
Communities**

2 February 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Serving Disadvantaged Communities**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)

Mrs Mary Bradley

Mr Jonathan Craig

Mr Trevor Lunn

Miss Michelle McIlveen

Mr John O'Dowd

Mrs Michelle O'Neill

Witnesses:

Mr John Harkin)

Ms Jill Markham) Oakgrove Integrated College

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey):

Jill and John, you are very welcome. We thank you for coming and ask you to make your presentation.

Ms Jill Markham (Oakgrove Integrated College):

Thank you. We will try to keep this as brief as we can. Oakgrove Integrated College is an all-ability college, and when I say “all-ability” I mean it. We have pupils from one end of the spectrum to the other, and we are very proud of that. Our main focus is self-esteem, and our ethos is built around that. We talk about and focus on the strengths of the pupils more than anything else. We have been serving the local community in Derry/Londonderry since 1992, and our current enrolment is 846. We are in the fortunate position of being very oversubscribed, and long may that continue.

We recently had the pleasure of an Education and Training Inspectorate standard inspection, and that spoke of improved standards in examination results, students showing respect for diversity, and high standards in teaching and learning, which we are very pleased about. We have 140 pupils in sixth form, four of whom are here today. I always say that they are my best ambassadors, because I would take them anywhere and let them talk to anybody. The post-16 curriculum is very varied and has increased significantly through the Foyle Learning Community, which is one of the biggest, if not the biggest, across Northern Ireland. We are a big community with 13 post-primary schools, and I feel that we are very successful. Three or four years ago, I had the privilege of being its first chair, and we have moved forward considerably since then. The opportunities that that provides for our pupils across the city hugely enriches their experience.

As members know, integrated education is parent-led, and they are very involved in what we do. We have four parent governors on our governing body so, as you can imagine, there is a lot of parental input. I do not quite know how the Department describes us, but we are a semi-rural school. We take from 45 primary schools in a huge catchment area, mainly because the nearest integrated post-primary schools to ours in Derry are Drumragh Integrated College in Omagh, which is in one direction, and North Coast Integrated College, which is the other direction. We, therefore, take from a very wide catchment area. We plan to make our presentation under the three loose headers of leadership, parents and underachievement. I will cover some of them and John will cover the others.

We are much focused on ensuring that students see models of leadership from staff and other students. That is a very high priority for us, because we feel that it allows the students' qualities of leadership to come out, and distributed leadership at all levels is the key to what we do. Given the age in which we are living, principals need to be creative, brave, passionate and not afraid to try new things. Those qualities also need to be brought out in our young people so that they can succeed once they go out into the wide world.

We have an open-door leadership style. Parents, pupils, governors and staff all know that we are and always will be there for them if they have any issues. That is very high on our priority list. We are also keen to ensure that we talk about solutions rather than problems, and our pupils feature very highly in that. We also have a very successful whole-school council system that runs through from year council to whole-school council, with representatives from each year group. We are keen that those representatives play a big part in running the school and in taking decisions.

We are one of only two post-primary schools in the UK that got the Rights Respecting Schools Award, because of our citizenship responsibilities across the school. As I say, we are very keen on finding solutions, and we run a number of projects to do that. This point ties into something that I want to say later about funding and the fact that there needs to be funding for such projects. At the minute, we are scrabbling for a bit here and a bit there. None of it is sustainable, because the funding is not there under the funding formula.

We are very focused on projects that empower the students as leaders. We are very involved with the Spirit of Enniskillen Trust and with Hands for a Bridge, which John will talk about. Those projects are to do with peer mediation and are peer-led. The students are trained to train other students, and we are very keen on that.

We have a welcome event for first-year students shortly after they arrive. We have tried many ways of doing it to see what is most successful, and we have used lots of external agencies to

deliver various things. We have found that the most successful way is for our students to lead workshops with parents, and some of them have been involved in that. One of the best things that we can do for the students is to enable the parents to see them in a leadership role. We are very involved in that area.

The board of governors is very involved in the school. The governors do a lot of staff training and student leadership mock interviews, because we feel that the pupils benefit hugely from seeing people from a range of life experiences working together to better the community. Derry is a small community in which people know each other, and it really benefits the students to see every facet of the school working together.

On the point about students being involved on the way that we make decisions at Oakgrove, the students are used to filling in surveys and interviewing people about various things. Their views are taken very seriously, and they can see that because certain things that they have talked about in school have been changed. That does not apply to everything but to certain ideas that they have come up with. Six years ago, when I took over, I audited all of the stakeholders, and the students were very important in that, and in how they saw the school going forward. Last week, seven or eight people from the British Council visited the school, and they commented on the fact that the students were given rein to bring them into any part of the school. We feel that we are not creating a cosmetic empowerment of pupils but a genuine empowerment, and we really focus on that.

Mr John Harkin (Oakgrove Integrated College):

I will talk about our work with parents and the community, which stems from the fact that, as an integrated school, we believe that we have significant duties to the community that established us, and we try to engage positively with every request that comes in. Although that can be time consuming, we find it to be mutually beneficial. Those requests can be local, national and international. I will not read into the record the long list of things that we have done, but we engage positively.

We also get great value from the extended schools initiatives such as parent classes. Students and parents working together in evening classes helps to create a mindset of lifelong learning, which is important. We also work with local organisations to develop horticulture as an after-school activity to grow, if you will pardon the pun, interest for a new qualification that we hope to introduce next year.

We work with a range of community initiatives. We were one of the first schools to bring in the district policing partnership (DPP) for its public hearing, and we work with charities and health promotion message giving. We have provided students to go out into the community to act as mentors for students in other schools and in other projects.

We have introduced home visits for parents who cannot come to the school easily, which relates to one of the issues raised when the Committee touched on the question of single-parent families. Sometimes, if there are other younger children, it is difficult for parents to come to the school, so members of our leadership team go to them. A member of the leadership team liaises with the primary schools to gather the information before the students come in, so that we have that information in advance.

We do a lot of work on literacy and numeracy, and we include parents in that work, because there is a cycle of poor literacy and numeracy to be broken. The other side of Northern Ireland's fame around the world for examination success is poor literacy and numeracy, and we have found that working with parents on that is an important way of changing the current situation.

We changed our parental consultation meetings with the junior school in response to parental surveys. We now offer one-to-one meetings with form teachers, which are longer and more detailed than traditional meetings, in which parents met a wide range of subject teachers. That was done in response to students surveying parents about what they preferred.

We run a large number of activities to integrate with the community, and we try to encourage students to suggest how we should do that. Next month, the students will work on our own

weave of diversity. I am sure that you are familiar with the Community Relations Council's one. We are going to create our own weave, so that students in the school from a range of diverse cultural backgrounds can celebrate those backgrounds. The school's primary aim is to remove barriers and make the school a welcome place, and a multicultural evening was one way in which we did that last year. It showed people who felt themselves to be in a minority that they certainly were not. It was very significant work. With another local school, we have just completed a shared art project, and we are beginning a shared writing project with two other local schools. All that encourages in young people the skill of working with others, and that has an impact on what they do in the classroom.

Our curriculum is built around students' needs. Students make free choices, and we try to meet their aspirations as best we can. We recognise the work of, and have collaborated strongly with, the Foyle Learning Community, but we feel that our school has some unique insights on diversity in the community. We recognise some of the barriers to collaboration in our city, and we work with others to overcome them. Those barriers include sectarianism, sectoral issues and, the major one, transport. We recognise the need to do more than just have young people side by side. We also get them involved in discussions, so that, when problems and tensions arise, which they do in this little place of ours, they can be addressed and young people can have the confidence to deal with them. Consequently, they will not grow into adults who think that, where there is a problem, it will remain a problem.

On underachievement, we recognise that, despite the other things that we are trying to do, we are, have been, and will be, judged by the standards that we achieve, and we are focused on raising standards for each child and the school. We provide a lot of academic support, including mentoring by staff and senior students. Teachers volunteer to do that, and senior students go into classes. We began by offering support to EAL students, because we were told about the importance of immersing them in the classroom, and we found that having senior students in the classroom was beneficial. Now it is something that students request. Families ask us to assign senior students who have strengths in particular areas to work with other students. We mentioned boys. A number of boys will engage much more happily with an older student than they do with

a member of staff, so we are meeting their needs.

We do a lot with data. Not only do we use it ourselves, but we share it with students. During our recent inspection, district inspector Liz Armour reminded us that nothing in education happens by accident, so we try to intervene with young people to let them see where they are and where they could be. Sometimes they can help us to identify things that are preventing them from making progress, and we address those things. We see each child as a student with a range of needs to be met. Those needs might be academic, familial or social. We do not label children, so we do not keep a register of children who, for example, come from a single-parent family. That was one of the factors that emerged from recent work with the Western Education and Library Board to identify underachievers in year 10. We are looking at how we might do more to address that with that year group and further down the school.

We also found that some of the anxieties that young people have are significant barriers to achievement. Over the past couple of years, therefore, we have increased massively the level of counselling that we provide to students in the school. We bring people in, which, again, is something that students suggested to us. Jill mentioned our Hands for a Bridge link with Seattle. When our students visited there, they experienced very powerfully the difference that having a mental health team based in the school can make. Students there are able to speak to a mental health counsellor. When we returned, we were discussing the significant level of suicide among young people in the local community, and one of the students suggested that, if we want to reduce that, we need to increase people's confidence to talk about problems. In response to that suggestion, we arranged for all year 8 students to meet a counsellor in small groups. Those meetings finished yesterday, and we are going to roll them out to other year groups.

However, that is expensive, and Jill has alluded to the fact that money is an issue. We are really struggling to provide counselling. We have counsellors in school five days a week, and they are kept busy. Students who have accessed the service are then able to provide support for others and encourage them to go and get help. We respond to any request for help, and we take any offers of help because we feel that that is the best way to benefit the young people. We think

that it is critical that we identify the needs of the students and where they are and, rather than judging them, help them out and help them to see their vision for where they want to be.

We had a meeting with parents of year-12 pupils last night at which we made the point that, although STEM subjects are very important, if they are not for their children, they should not do them. It is important that students recognise their strengths and interests and are aware of the needs in the wider community. However, we are child-centred and are guided by students. Our aim is to not just prepare students for the future and empower them because they will be our future; it is very important that they know that they can shape that future now.

Ms Markham:

I will make a couple of comments to sum up. Some of the questions to us alluded to how we measure successful schools, and one aspect that is lacking at the minute is a measure of value-added projects. We put huge focus on value-added measures such as YELLIS, MidYIS and ALIS, which is the suite of value-added tests that we do to find the baseline for our pupils when they come in. Someone asked whether a grade D is a success. If students come in at a baseline that is much lower than a D, then, as far as I am concerned, a D is a success. It is not an excuse for a pupil not to do as well; it is a genuine measure. We talk a lot about underachievement, but we have found that it has as much to do with under-aspiring as it is with underachieving. We find that more and more as time goes on.

In the not-so-distant past, I was in Washington with several people and had the pleasure of listening to Dr Jerry Weast — I am sure you have met him many times — from Montgomery County, which is one of the most successful counties. I had two very interesting visits there. They talk about how no child should be left behind and about closing the gap. We subscribe to those ideas, but — for want of a better phrase — they put their money where their mouth is and target the need. They have a system of green, red and amber schools. Any schools that are in red zone have their need targeted, and it has been proven to work. I know that that is very data-driven and that there is more to life in education than data, but we need to look seriously at targeting the need.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. A couple of practical issues came out of the presentation, and John's last point touched on counselling services. We all come here today with a sense of sadness, given the events that unfolded in the past few days with the tragic deaths of the two young people in west Belfast. Our thoughts and prayers are with those families, and none of us can begin to comprehend the sorrow that those families are going through.

Given your close proximity to Gransha Hospital, which provides mental health services, do you buy in the service that you currently provide or have you, because of your location — and I want to ask something else about the location — been able to use that proximity to the health provision as a benefit and as a facility for the school?

Mr Harkin:

We have not used that for the counselling that is bought in. However, nurses sometimes visit the school to speak to groups. So, we have benefitted in that way. The service that we currently buy in is from Relate, and one reason why we use that service is because it has also done work with families. It emerged very quickly that issues with some children are related to significant issues with the family. Relate offered that ability to work with families as well.

We feel a particular duty to promote mental-health issues. The Chairperson of the Health Committee came to the school a few years ago, and we invited students from all the local schools to speak at that event. That was an attempt to feed in young people's views on mental-health issues. Every year, we mark World Mental Health Day in a significant way by bringing in people from the hospital. Students have also taken part in presentations with the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

The Chairperson:

Obviously, your school is located a distance out of the city. It is an integrated school, and there are huge issues in the city as regards ensuring integration in many of the services delivered, and

so on. Your school has been successful, as indicated by your numbers and intake and all of that. Do you feel that your location has been a benefit or a hindrance to maximising integration? The reason that I ask that is that the proposals for Foyle and Londonderry College and Ebrington Primary School, which will basically move a school from one side of the city to the other, would put another new school in close proximity to your school and Lisneal College. Do you see that as a challenge, a help or a hindrance?

Ms Markham:

There was talk not so long ago — partly through Bert Montgomery, who is on my governing body — about Foyle and Londonderry College and Lisneal College coming onto the Gransha site. I am not sure when that was, but it was not that long ago. Can you remember, Mary?

Mrs M Bradley:

It was about seven years ago.

Ms Markham:

There was definitely talk of it. That would have been a community in itself, because we would all have been there. I do not know whether John disagrees, but I do not see it as a hindrance. However, who knows whether the Foyle and Londonderry and Ebrington site will go ahead? There is all sorts of speculation about that. Personally, I do not think that it would hinder us in any way. If anything, it will increase access to working with people.

Mr Harkin:

Location is obviously important, but the barriers are in people's hearts and minds. We need to address that. Bishop Mahaffey, with whom we work closely, comes into the school from time to time. In respect of the proposals for Foyle and Londonderry College to move, he made the point that, if people's sense of ease about mixing with others is just that they see a uniform in the streets when they are shopping, that is not proper integration or proper cross-community relations. We do not see those proposals as a barrier.

Mr Craig:

John, I listened to what you said with interest. Do the vast majority of the children at your school come from the city of Londonderry itself, or is there a huge mix of pupils from the city and those from rural areas?

Ms Markham:

Obviously, we take a lot of people from the city, but we have a significant and healthy mix of pupils from the city and those from rural areas.

Mr Craig:

A good, healthy mix.

Ms Markham:

That mix includes children from Strabane on one side, those from the city itself, and those from Limavady on the other side.

Mr Harkin:

It is a wide catchment.

Mr Craig:

John, I was interested in what you said, because my experience is that the closer you get to the inner city, the greater the family difficulties and breakdowns. How does your school deal with problem families — that is the only way that I will try to describe them — and family breakdowns that affect the children? Do you have a mechanism for dealing with that through your pastoral-care policies? I noted with interest that you said that you had brought experts in. Is that one of the issues that they deal with?

Mr Harkin:

One of the groups that we have worked with fairly recently is Reach Them Young, which is an Opportunity Youth project. It is very useful in dealing with these situations. An important part

of that is working with families, because it requires their support.

I am conscious that we are on public record, but when working with what you might call “problem” families, there is often a historical difficulty with education. Sometimes, parents will be reluctant to engage with the school directly, or they will feel that the school making suggestions — because we sometimes make suggestions when we have meetings with parents — about how conflicts, disputes or difficulties can be resolved can come easier to families when it has been suggested by someone else.

However, the strength of Reach them Young is that it is about working together. When a project worker goes out to a family, he or she will carry messages similar to those coming from the school, but it provides a means of communication. It has worked with a number of our students where we had absolutely no response when we got in touch directly, even with statutory involvement. We got no direct response, yet we have had a response when we have worked with Reach them Young. Again, it is another area where that sort of thing can change mindsets and make a difference because it will make a significant impact. I am thinking of a couple of families, but that will have a significant impact on communities.

Mr Craig:

I agree that the issue is about getting the family involved with the school, rather than the pupil, because the pupil is already there and is involved. The important thing is getting the family involved and getting that parental backup that is required for the children. Do you find that third-party help has assisted in that?

Mr Harkin:

Yes.

Mrs M Bradley:

I heard what John said, and that is quite accurate from that school. There is no doubt that all our schools have problems they need to deal with, but I find that the parents are very confident and

have great confidence in their schools and the support that they get from those schools. The support is there for the children, and that is right.

Mr Lunn:

I want to ask about your admissions criteria. I know how it works, but you have only got three integrated primary schools feeding into the school, plus Sion Mills Primary School. They are fairly widespread. I am aware that you have a large catchment area, but do you find that those schools can supply the bulk of your intake, or is there a cohort of parents who make a considered choice for their children to move at age 11 from the state system into an integrated school?

Ms Markham:

Obviously, our main feeder school is Oakgrove Integrated Primary School, and we take the bulk of their P7 pupils. Roe Valley and Groarty Primary Schools are much smaller, but as they build up and parents come into the school — we bring them into the school to see what is going on and what we can offer — those numbers are growing. We take from a very wide catchment area.

Certain schools in the town would traditionally send a large part of their P7 cohort to us; Londonderry Model Primary School is one, and Greenhaw Primary School is another; there are five or six that we would consider to be major feeders. We always have the issue where some parents who send their children to one of the three integrated primary schools near us will decide that they want to move away from integrated education at transfer age and send their children to one of the grammar schools perhaps. There are several very successful schools near us. There is always going to be a bit of movement, but generally we take the bulk of them.

Mr Lunn:

I know Mary will shout at me here —

Mrs M Bradley:

I would not. Of course I would not.

Mr Lunn:

Derry/Londonderry, or “stroke city” —

Mrs M Bradley:

It is Derry.

Mr Lunn:

Let me go on here. *[Laughter.]*

Londonderry has led the way in so many ways in the advancement of our society, but I would not have placed it high on the list of places where there would be a demand for integrated education; yet there clearly is. Why is that? Is it just the acknowledged quality of the education that you provide or the spectacular facilities that you have? Is there a genuine demand?

Ms Markham:

I think that it is a combination of all of those things. You are well aware that the integrated movement is parent-led, and parents took the risk at the very beginning to send their children to an integrated school. Oakgrove was set up in 1992 with 75 pupils.

Mrs M Bradley:

I opened it.

Ms Markham:

I know that you did. Mary can talk to you about this as well as anybody. The parents took that risk, and the people who went to teach there, who had a genuine passion for integration, took the risk of going there, never knowing whether they were going to get paid. It is a combination of everything. We have fantastic facilities, for which we are always very grateful. I know that we are biased, but we feel that we deliver a great standard of education. There is a genuine passion and interest from a large part of the community that wants integration.

Mr Harkin:

It is very hard to pinpoint, but the most sustained thing we hear about in feedback is the engagement of students with the community. It is always positive. We talk about them as our greatest ambassadors. They go to a wide range of community events and meet people, and they talk about the school.

Mrs O'Neill:

You spoke about young people under-aspiring. Tackling that is a task in itself, before you even take on the curriculum. I am sure that has to start from the day and hour that they walk into the school. Will you say a bit about what you do in relation to that?

Ms Markham:

The data from the baseline testing will automatically show up what they call under-aspirers. To be honest, it becomes apparent very quickly when they come into us by their mindset, how they see the school and how their past experience has influenced them. I alluded earlier to the sort of projects that we deal with and the way we work with the pupils on leadership. Basically we show them that, regardless of where they come from or what their background is, they are as capable as anyone else in the school of fulfilling their dreams and going out there and making a difference. One of the things that we always say is that, if we do nothing else, we want to educate them to the point where they can go out and make a difference.

Everything we do is focused. John spoke about the project we are running in year 10 called the anchor project. It involves boys from single-parent families and is to do with re-engaging them with the curriculum. Those are the sorts of projects in which we constantly try to be involved and in which we are constantly being asked to take part. That project is actually funded by the health board and is a good link between the health board and education. It needs to become embedded. We need to have the funding to be able to embed that all the time.

Mrs O'Neill:

You spoke earlier about empowering young people. I think that is key, because, from my experience of community work, I can see that giving young people a position of leadership and

responsibility really turns everything around. Thank you.

Mr O’Dowd:

What is the breakdown of the socio-economic background of your pupils? Do you know what kinds of backgrounds are included in your catchment area?

Ms Markham:

We have significant numbers of students from neighbourhood renewal areas. I cannot tell you exact figures, but we have significant numbers from neighbourhood renewal areas and significant numbers that are on the special educational needs register. Between 32% and 33% of our pupils are entitled to free school meals, which is obviously a big benchmark that the Department of Education uses. We have a significant number of pupils from deprived backgrounds.

Mr O’Dowd:

I will ask you a question that I put to Rev Brown but perhaps from a different angle. Your relationship with your board of governors — you may not want to do this on record —

Ms Markham:

I have no issue there; I can speak perfectly openly.

Mr O’Dowd:

How do you see the relationship between the board of governors and the teaching management side?

Ms Markham:

It is evolving. I agree with Rev Brown when he said that the role of the board of governors is changing and they are not the experts in the field of teaching and learning.

Our governors come from a very wide range of backgrounds. They are very keen to, and do, get involved in what is going on in the school, not so much from a teaching and learning

perspective, although we are in the throes of setting up a curriculum teaching and learning committee among the board of governors. They are genuinely very keen to get in, for no reason other than to support what is going on in the classroom and beyond.

Mr O'Dowd:

This is the unfair question; do you feel that you are held to account by the board of governors? Or, does the board of governors act more like a support network?

Ms Markham:

It is a support network, but the governors are the first ones to question me. They certainly hold me to account, and quite rightly so. We all need to have accountability. The governors do not do that in a threatening way, but they know what is going on. Integrated schools tend to hold meetings with their boards of governors more than other schools; we meet once a month with the board of governors, which is quite a lot. The governors are also in the school an awful lot. They do not ring me up to say that they are coming in; they will just come in. Our staff generally do not see that as a threat. The governors are genuinely part of the school. That being said, I have to be accountable to them, and I would always want to be accountable to them.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for bringing your pupils today. Many issues will come out of the presentations that have been made to us. Our plan and purpose is to distil the information, because we will pick up phrases and ideas that can make an invaluable contribution to helping us to understand the key components of a successful post-primary school. We wish you well. I want to thank all the schools that took part for the invaluable contributions that they have made.