



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Research and Library Service Research Paper

November 2010

Caroline Perry

Successful Post-Primary Schools Serving Disadvantaged Communities

Overall summary

NIAR 601-10

This paper summarises the four briefings in this series on *Successful Post-Primary Schools Serving Disadvantaged Communities*; Qualities for effective school leadership; School engagement with parents and the wider community; Addressing underachievement in disadvantaged communities; and Department of Education school improvement policy.

It finds that schools should seek to address underachievement in deprived areas through a range of areas, with effective school leadership and high quality teaching and learning central to any approach. These should be supported by engagement with parents and the wider community, a culture of high expectations and the effective use of data.

Paper 01/11

2 December 2010

Key Points

- There is widespread recognition of the link between lower family income and poorer educational outcomes for children;
- This paper explores four key areas that are linked to educational outcomes: school leadership; engagement with parents and the wider community; addressing underachievement in disadvantaged communities; and Department of Education school improvement policy;
- It is important to note that a broad range of factors contribute to educational attainment, and local contexts and circumstances must be taken into account when considering measures that have helped to improve attainment elsewhere;
- School leadership is second only to classroom teaching in terms of its influence on outcomes for students: it is therefore essential that school principals have the appropriate skills and qualities to carry out their role effectively;
- Important personal qualities for effective leaders include a system of core values; high expectations of and respect for others; emotional intelligence and resilience; and personal conviction;
- Engagement with parents and the wider community can play an important part in supporting children's education, although schools are limited in the extent to which they can make large-scale changes through such approaches;
- Department of Education school improvement policies aim to improve standards in schools and to address underachievement;
- Schools seeking to address underachievement must recognise the need to drive improvements across a range of areas;
- High quality teaching and learning and effective school leadership should be central to attempts to address underachievement; and
- These factors should also be supported by a culture of high expectations, engagement with parents and community and the effective use of data; these are the key characteristics shared among successful schools serving disadvantaged communities.

Executive Summary

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that disadvantage and deprivation are linked to educational outcomes for children, with children from families with lower incomes less likely to perform well at school than those from better-off families.

This briefing paper considers four key areas that are often linked to the performance of schools: qualities for effective school leadership; school engagement with parents and the wider community; addressing underachievement in disadvantaged communities; and Department of Education school improvement policy.

It is important to note, however, that a wide and complex range of factors contribute to educational outcomes for children, and as such, there is no “one size fits all” approach to addressing underachievement. Local contexts and circumstances must be taken into account when considering measures that have helped to improve attainment in other schools, areas or countries.

Qualities for effective school leadership

School leadership is second only to classroom teaching in terms of its influence on outcomes for pupils. Its impact is greatest in schools where pupils’ learning needs are the most significant.

However, the roles and responsibilities of school leaders are becoming increasingly complex and demanding; requiring principals to have a broad range of skills and attributes in order to effectively carry out their duties. This is likely to be particularly important in schools serving disadvantaged communities.

The evidence suggests that there is a strong link between leaders’ personal qualities and their success as a leader. Key qualities of effective leaders include a system of core values; high expectations of and respect for others; emotional resilience; commitment; and optimism. The distribution of leadership throughout the school is also a key practice of effective school leaders.

Effective leaders of schools in deprived contexts possess many of the same attributes as their counterparts in more advantaged areas. Characteristics that are thought to play a particularly important role in their success include:

- Risk-taking;
- Personal humility;
- Emotional intelligence; and
- Personal conviction.

School engagement with parents and the wider community

Engagement with parents and the wider community is an important strategy for many schools in deprived contexts in seeking to address underachievement. Engagement is carried out in a range of ways, such as providing training and guidance for parents to enable them to support their children's learning, offering counselling and support to parents, and developing partnerships with other schools.

Another form of engagement is extended schools, which aim to offer a broad range of services to children, families and communities beyond their main business of teaching and learning. Examples of services provided include breakfast and after-school clubs, and the opening of school facilities for community use.

Assessments of engagement have identified some positive outcomes for pupils, families and communities; although it is likely that other factors have also contributed to these outcomes. It is important to note that schools face challenges particularly with regard to resourcing initiatives, and as such, impacts from engagement are likely to be generally small-scale in nature.

Addressing underachievement in disadvantaged communities

Gaps in attainment between children from different socio-economic backgrounds can already be wide at the beginning of post-primary school. While intervention in early childhood is likely to have the greatest effect on educational outcomes, actions taken in post-primary schools can play a key role in preventing further widening of the attainment gap.

It is important to note that schools cannot address underachievement through individual actions. Rather, approaches must recognise the need to work towards improvements across a range of areas, using a carefully planned, reflective approach. The following figure illustrates the key features of schools who achieve strong educational outcomes for children, despite serving areas of great disadvantage.



It is clear from the evidence that high quality teaching and learning and effective school leadership are critical to addressing underachievement. These key factors also need to be supported by a culture of high expectations, engagement with parents and the community and the effective use of data. These are the characteristics shared by successful schools serving disadvantaged areas.

Department of Education school improvement policy

The Department of Education has put into place, and is developing, a number of policies that seek to promote school improvement and help to address underachievement in schools. The key school improvement policy is *Every School a Good School*, which sets out a vision of schools as “*self-improving, well governed and effectively led communities of practice... meeting the needs and aspirations of all pupils.*”

Other important policies include Raising Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy; the draft strategy on Special Educational Needs; Extended Schools; and the Entitlement Framework, which aims to provide all pupils aged 14 and over with a greater choice and flexibility in the curriculum offer.

All of these policies have a key objective of raising standards in schools, particularly those in disadvantaged areas that are not performing as well as might be expected. The policies recognise that a successful school is built on strong leadership and high quality teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Post-primary schools serving disadvantaged communities face great challenges in addressing underachievement. However, there are many examples in the evidence of schools that achieve strong educational outcomes for their pupils despite working in challenging contexts.

It is clear that schools seeking to address underachievement must recognise the need to work across a number of areas; acknowledging that single actions or initiatives are unlikely to lead to significant improvement in outcomes for children. High quality teaching and learning and effective leadership must be central to any approach, and these should be supported by a culture of high expectations, the involvement of parents and the wider community, and the effective use of data.

For further information on the series *Successful Post-Primary Schools Serving Disadvantaged Communities* please refer to:

[Part A: Qualities for effective school leadership](#)

[Part B: School engagement with parents and the wider community](#)