

# ***No Child Left Behind***

A report on Educational Underachievement in  
Northern Ireland



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## **Acknowledgements**

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I would like to specifically mention my friend, and the current Education Minister, Peter Weir MLA with whom I have worked on this issue for a number of years now. His personal support to me has been invaluable.

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*"If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales."*

**Albert Einstein**

## **Executive Summary**

This report seeks to identify some of the causes of educational underachievement that we know exists in Northern Ireland and offer some possible solutions to this problem.

The causes of educational underachievement are many and varied. Part of the process of tackling the problem involves recognising the facts that there is neither a magic money tree to produce endless intervention funds nor a single silver bullet with which to eradicate the problem.

From the moment of conception, some children face significantly greater obstacles which need to be met and overcome before they are in a position to realise their full potential. Some manage to overcome these barriers and others do not.

Educational underachievement is not something that is particularly unique to Northern Ireland, but exists in all parts of the world to a greater or lesser extent. Too often, discussions about educational policy in Northern Ireland narrowly focuses upon fixed positions on academic selection. Regardless of our own particular stance on the system of transfer to post-primary schooling the problem of children failing to develop and achieve will remain with us.

The research contained in this report supports the notion that those who struggle most are very often from deprived socio-economic backgrounds. It further suggests that teachers and parents are the two key factors that directly affect whether a child will succeed or fail.

Leadership in schools, especially in socially deprived areas, is crucial in changing both teaching and parental aspirations. A strategy to tackle educational underachievement must be both comprehensive in its scope and demonstrate cognisance of the aspects contributing to the conditions which perpetuate underachievement.

***“There are no easy answers, but there are simple answers. We must have the courage to do what we know is morally right”***

**President Ronald Reagan**

## **A Personal Introduction**

Tackling educational underachievement is something that I have personally been passionate about for a number of years now, in fact it was the key theme of my Mayoral year in 2014-15. I have been told about boys at Key Stage 2 unable to read and write, of mums who feed their babies Coca Cola from bottles and children who are in Primary 3 and still in nappies. We cannot ignore these rather unpalatable facts, nor should we. These children have never even had the opportunity to succeed or fail as we have. I am minded of Edmund Burke who once wrote

***'Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little.'***

Therefore I am under no illusion of the scale of the task and the difficulties in even addressing it but I can no longer use either as my excuse for inaction.

I am not a proponent of Government legislating and interfering in people's lives, however there is a clear role for it in guidance, support and help. Neither should we judge those, especially parents, who are struggling; we do not condemn, but we help and guide.



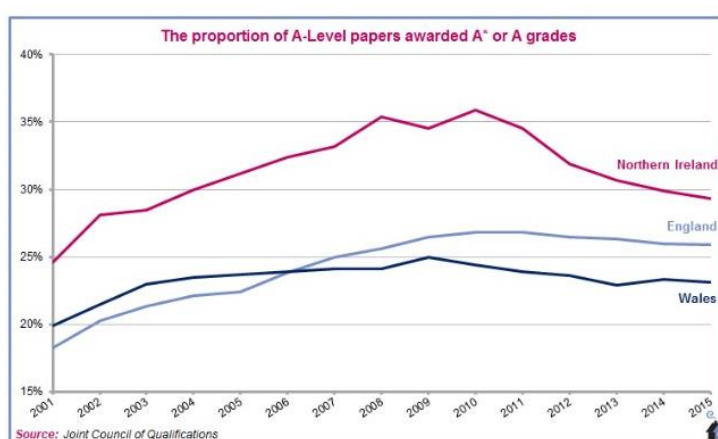
This document is not a piece of academic research, nor is it a formal report or even a policy document. It is simply a briefing paper with a call for action.

## **Background**

'Educational Underachievement' is by no means a 'new' concept. One of the reasons for its more recent newsworthiness is that economic changes in many Western countries have led to a drop in the number of jobs available in manufacturing and other fields which in the past have been filled with young male apprentices, often following their fathers into similar jobs. We have seen this play out in Northern Ireland with the loss of a number of sizable manufacturing bases and the replacement of these jobs within the service sector.



The title of this report '**No Child Left Behind**' is a reference to the Act<sup>1</sup> introduced by previous US President George Bush. NCLB, in the United States was all about standardised testing, however this report simply seeks to identify some of the issues surrounding educational underachievement that we need to grapple with here in Northern Ireland and provide some possible solutions. It should also be noted that whilst in Northern Ireland we struggle with specific low attainment especially within the demographic of Protestant [Free School Meals] Boys we also have some of the best 'A Level' examination results within the UK.



This issue was identified a number of years ago, when in 2008, the Department of Education's own report Literacy and Numeracy in the Northern Ireland<sup>2</sup> highlighted these problems. Eight years ago measures to

<sup>1</sup><http://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/no-child-left-behind-overview-definition-summary.html>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.amazingbrains.co.uk/static/uploads/media/pdfs/Deni,%202008.pdf>

improve boys' performance were suggested at the individual, pedagogical, school and at a system-wide level. These included:

1. Mentoring
2. Target-setting and more personalised learning
3. Introducing greater variety in teaching styles and activities
4. Creating an ethos of high expectations and aspirations throughout the school
5. Using data effectively to identify areas of difficulty
6. Developing appropriate professional development for teachers
7. Disseminating good practice.

Then in 2012 the PISA study Student Achievement in Northern Ireland: Results in Mathematics, Science, and Reading Among 15 Year Olds from the OECD<sup>3</sup> found that

***"NI had a relatively low percentage of pupils in the highest achieving levels average in Mathematics and a similar difference in performance between the highest and lowest attainers to the OECD. In Science here was a relatively large difference between the score points of the lowest scoring pupils and the highest scoring pupils compared with other countries. In reading NI had a relatively large difference between the lowest and the highest scoring pupils compared with many other countries"***

This 'relatively large' difference is known in education circles as the 'long tail' and is the difference between very high and very low performance.

## **Is this a simply a Northern Ireland Problem?**

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/PQUK03/PQUK03.pdf>

The short answer to this question is no it's not. In fact clear evidence suggests a very similar pattern in Great Britain – the demographic in question switching to ‘White British Boys’. The House Of Commons Education Committee published a report in 2014 Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children<sup>4</sup> which found similar results to the already well published research in NI.

**“Overall, the evidence from analysing free school meals (FSM) data is that:**

- 1. White British children eligible for FSM are consistently the lowest performing ethnic group of children from low income households, at all ages (other than small subgroups of white children)**
- 2. The attainment “gap” between those children eligible for free school meals and the remainder is wider for white British and [Northern] Irish children than for other ethnic groups**
- 3. This gap widens as children get older”**

This research is confirmed by OFSED in their report Access and achievement in education – 20 years on

***“In 2012, only 26% of disadvantaged White British boys and 35% of disadvantaged White British girls achieved five good GCSEs including English and Mathematics”***<sup>5</sup>

Much has been made of abolishing selective testing as the silver bullet to solve this problem but there is little evidence to suggest this would actually deal effectively with this challenge. England has a small number of Grammar schools [163] in comparison to its vast Comprehensive system of about 3,000 schools<sup>6</sup>. Yet it is clear from the results that despite the fact that the majority of English schools do not employ selective testing it suffers similar problems to NI in terms of educational underachievement. In other words without its selective testing it is still not performing significantly better than a system which does employ testing and then also fails to produce the 'upper end' results that pupils from Northern Ireland do.



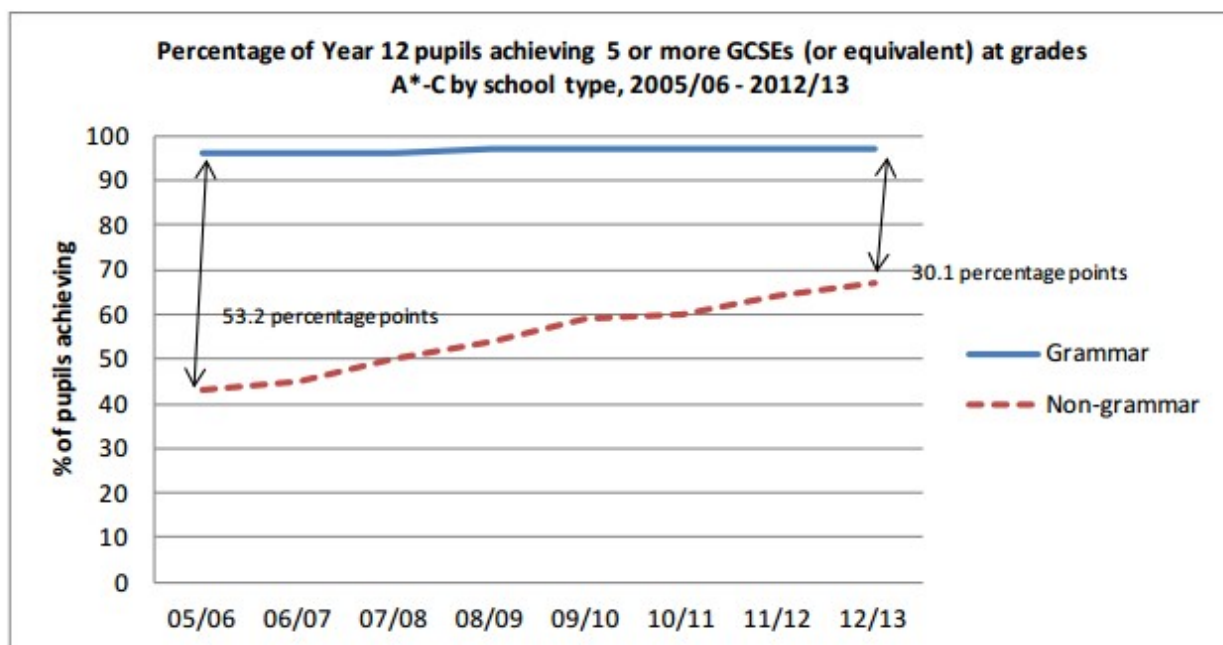
<sup>4</sup><http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmeduc/142/142.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/379157/Unseen\\_20children\\_20-20access\\_20and\\_20achievement\\_2020\\_20years\\_20on.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/379157/Unseen_20children_20-20access_20and_20achievement_2020_20years_20on.pdf)

<sup>6</sup><http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-34538222>



It should also be positively noted that, as detailed in the ETIs most recent Chief Inspectors report,<sup>7</sup> the gap in achievement between Grammar and Non-grammar schools is narrowing. The specific issue is that within the 'Non-grammar' sector there are a number of pupils still really struggling at the bottom end of the spectrum.



Source: *Year 12 and Year 14 Examination Performance at Post-Primary Schools in Northern Ireland 2012-13 (Revised)* (NISRA, 27 March 2014)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/inspection-reports/the-chief-inspectors-report/ci-report-2012-2014.pdf>

## **Why are Early Learning Interventions so important?**

There is clear research to suggest that a child's development is significantly shaped by the quality of its environment. Studies consistently show that children raised in warm and nurturing homes are more likely to feel better about themselves as people, do well in school and make intelligent choices about their relationships and careers in early adulthood. Findings from the Minnesota Longitudinal study<sup>8</sup> have observed that children who are securely attached to their parents in infancy are more likely to be self-confident, motivated and pro-social by the time they reach early adolescence.

Research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in their paper Analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England<sup>9</sup> confirmed what many of us already know that,

***“the attainment gaps at age eleven were already large and actually the further widening was relatively small in the teen years compared with earlier in childhood”***

John Hopkins University, quoting research from Shonkoff & Phillips (2000,) states that

***“Simply put, a child's early years development lays the foundation for all that is to come. In recent years, researchers have learned that the human brain develops the vast majority of its neurons, and is at its most receptive to learning, between birth and three years of age. In fact, the intake of new information is critical to the formation of active neural pathways”***




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<sup>8</sup>[https://lifespanslearn.org/documents/A\\_Sroufe.pdf](https://lifespanslearn.org/documents/A_Sroufe.pdf)

<sup>9</sup><https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poorer-children%E2%80%99s-educational-attainment-how-important-are-attitudes-and-behaviour>

The Washington based early years organization Zero to Three<sup>10</sup> makes another very salient point in this area.

***“The brain is the only organ that is not fully formed at birth. During the first three years, trillions of connections between brain cells are being made. A child’s relationships and experiences during the early years greatly influence how their brain grows”.***

In essence if the child is already struggling by the time they leave Primary education it becomes much more difficult to unravel this damage during their teens or later life. Therefore the case is sound to intervene early to prevent, rather than later to repair. This also happens to be a fiscally sound policy.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.zerotothree.org/early-development/brain-development>

## The Impact of Socio-Economic Factors

There is sound longitudinal research to suggest that educational underachievement is more prevalent in socially and economically deprived areas. It is the case that babies from generally poorer backgrounds have a worse home learning environment (Dearden, 2011). It is also clear that poor Speech & Language at age five correlates with worse literacy, employment and mental health outcomes at age 34 (Law, 2009) and children with the lowest reading ability at age seven have 20% lower wages at age 33 (Currie & Thomas, 1999).

The Joseph Rowntree foundation in its research paper Poorer children’s educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour stated the following:

**“there were big differences in cognitive development between children from rich and poor backgrounds at the age of three, and this gap widened by age five.”<sup>11</sup>**

This is further confirmed by the research of Hart, Betty; Risley, Todd R (1995) Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children. They assessed the social environment that kids grow up in and the impact this can have educationally and developmentally,

**“Children from families on welfare heard about 616 words per hour, while those from working class families heard around 1,251 words per hour, and those from professional families heard roughly 2,153 words per hour. Thus, children being raised in middle to high income class homes had far more language exposure to draw from”**




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<sup>11</sup><https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poorer-children%E2%80%99s-educational-attainment-how-important-are-attitudes-and-behaviour>

Sir John Jones, in his book 'The Magic Weaving Business' (2009), summarises some of Hart, Betty, Risley & Todd's work. By age four he points out that a 'Professional family' will have spoken 50 million words to the child, a 'Working Class' family 30 million and finally a family on Welfare Benefits 12 million. More striking is the analysis of what types of words are used. This table explains the data.

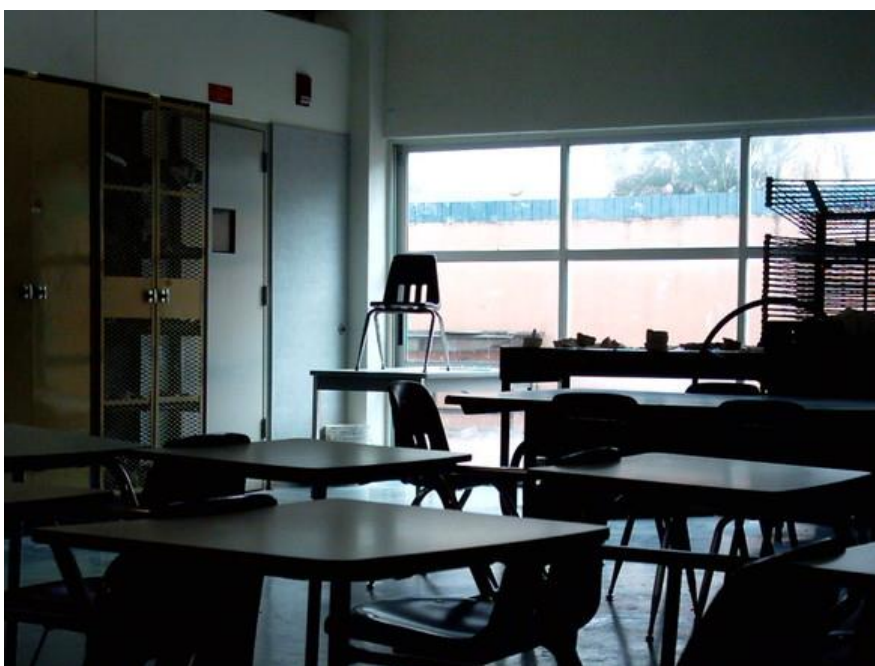
Family	Words of Encouragement	Words of Discouragement
Professional	166,000	26,000
Working Class	62,000	36,000
Benefits	26,000	57,000

These are issues that we need to address. In fact we need to ask the question why do kids from 'poorer backgrounds' continue to struggle? Regardless of whatever socio-economic grouping the parents come from, there is no clear evidence that these children are disadvantaged more than any other grouping in terms of specific learning opportunities. Support services are present through various agencies and during the key learning stage of years 0-3 the key educational stimulation outlined in this report can be garnered through simple reading to the child, interacting with it and 'attaching' to it.

A Primary School Principal from a socially deprived area,

***"In my experience the reason the majority of the parents, who are hard to reach or disengaged or have low expectations, is not because they don't care for their children. They have low self-esteem, poor self-confidence; they have other factors/issues to deal with – domestic violence, marriage/partnership difficulties, addiction, poverty and debt"***

Clearly a child coming from this type of background is going to struggle, not just educationally but also developmentally. These issues require a multi-agency approach and great work is being done in some of these cases involving schools, government, charities and community organisations working together.



The Literacy Trust clearly supports the fact that family background or income are not predictors of pupil achievement<sup>12</sup>

***"Research has also repeatedly shown that the most accurate predictor of a pupil's achievement is not parental income or social status but the extent to which parents are able to create a home environment that encourages learning, communicates high, yet reasonable, expectations for achievement and future careers and where parents become involved in their children's education at the school and in the community"***

In many cases this is not a 1<sup>st</sup> generational problem. Qualitative evidence suggests that current young grandparents may have struggled in this area and effectively passed this behaviour down to their children. A new young mum might then model the behaviour of her mother and so the problem self-replicates and it becomes a cycle of underachievement.

There is also a fear among these parents of any involvement or intervention from the state. A Community Worker consulted as part of this report said,

***"Parents fear engaging with statutory programmes as they view them as social services by stealth"***

The only way to combat this is to build relationships with the parents to break down these barriers. That Community Worker went on to say,

***"If parents have underachieved themselves then that is the continuation of the cycle as they won't have the ability to work with their child. The home should be an equal educator with the school"***

The Centre for Research in Early Childhood conducted some research in 2014<sup>13</sup> In particular they cite five interventions that can make impacts

1. Programmes that provide support to parents during pregnancy and early childhood;
2. Early health programmes for children 0-5 years
3. Programmes that combine parent support, health and early education and care for children 0-2 years;
4. Early education and care programmes for children 0-2 years;
5. Early education programmes for children 3-4 years

It is also clear that early years interventions are often more expensive than later ones but the CREC state that

***"The impact of early education as a strategy in countering socio-economic disadvantage has been well documented in the research literature"***

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/2038/Why\\_families\\_matter.pdf](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/2038/Why_families_matter.pdf)

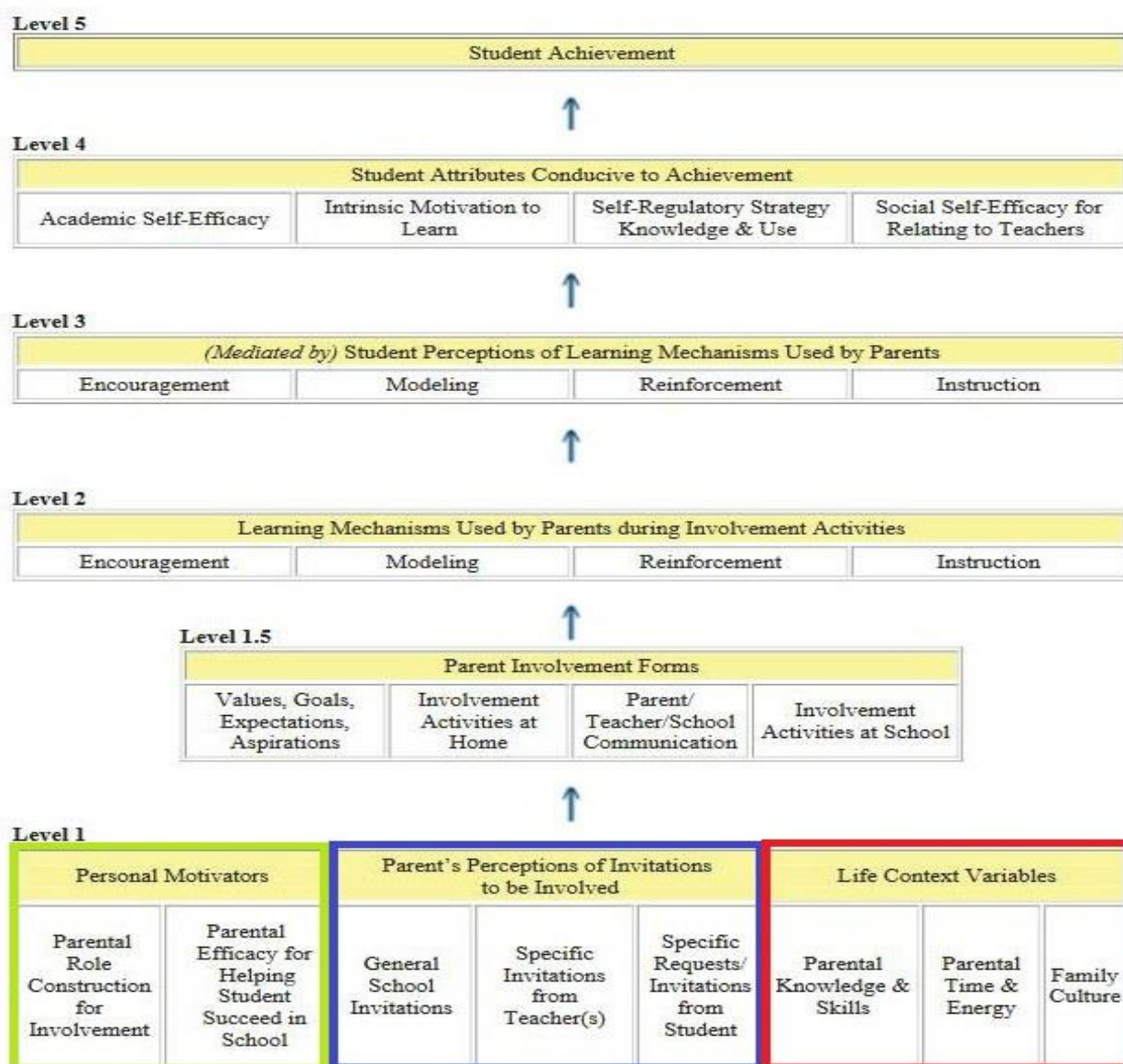
<sup>13</sup> <http://www.crec.co.uk/docs/Access.pdf>

## How Children Learn & Achieve

The Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (2005) model is fairly well known and is an internationally recognised piece of academic research. Rather than discuss the whole model I have highlighted three boxes at Level 1 and then colour coded them.

### Why is parent involvement important?

#### Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of the Parental Involvement Process



Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997, 2005, 2010.

Level 1 are the 'building blocks' of a child's education. Without these in place at an early age it becomes significantly more difficult to effect change or improve development at later levels.

## Parents Perceptions of Invitations to be involved

These are environmental factors which impact on the parent. They could be parent-teacher meetings, invitations to breakfast clubs, attendance at nativity plays or sports days. Very often the context of these is crucial especially with parents who have themselves struggled with their own 'school experience'. The school principals that have been consulted as part of this report are aware of this factor and being creative in trying to address these issues.

### Personal Motivators & Life Context Variables

Personal motivators are the attitude and ability of parents to help their child succeed at school. In effect they are the drivers and ability of parents to effect their child's education.

Life Context Variables are the factors which impact on parents: do they have the educational capacity, time and ability to make a positive impact?

Ron Mirr (2009) developed a useful set of questions for schools in self evaluating their own response to the model, which is helpful. It would be useful for all schools in Northern Ireland to self evaluate themselves using these questions. This could be done through the Board of Governors.

Level 1—Helping motivate parents to be involved, helping parents feel invited to participate, and understanding and honoring factors that effect parent participation

#### *Understanding and honoring factors that effect parent participation*

8. How is your school asking parents about cultural factors in your school community that would effect parent participation and student learning? What has your school learned?
7. How is your school asking parents about time & energy constraints they face that may effect their participation? What has your school learned?
6. How is your school asking about your parents' knowledge and skills and about how parent perceptions about these correspond with what their children are supposed to be learning? What has your school learned?

#### *Helping parents feel invited to participate*

5. How do students in your school make specific invitations to encourage their parent's participation?
4. How do teachers in your school make specific invitations to encourage parent participation?
3. How does your school make general invitations to encourage parent participation?

#### *Helping motivate parents to be involved*

2. How does your school help reinforce parents' confidence that they as parents can effectively help their children?
1. How does your school help parents understand how parent participation will help their children learn and be successful?



## **Issues to consider**

### **1. Parental Aspirations and Attitudes**

This is, in essence, a cultural issue and therefore hard to affect quickly. It is clear that children coming from poorer backgrounds are much more likely to underachieve. This is primarily not because they lack support from statutory agencies but rather it would appear that some parents have little aspiration or no expectation for their child. This can outwork itself by them seeing little or no value in reading to their child or developing its analytical skills by answering its questions or encouraging creative play. It should also be stated that some parents have a latent fear of all statutory agencies as they assume this leads towards social services intervention. Whilst conducting research for this report there was plenty of qualitative data from schools found the parents of some of these children very 'hard to reach' and 'hard to engage'.

One NI School Primary Principal

***"Children from homes where parents choose not to be involved and support education, are often admitted to schools where the standards of teaching need to be improved"***

Excellent strategies which some school leaders have adopted such as 'breakfast clubs' to bring in children and parents to meet with teachers, often attracted the parents of the already motivated kids and seldom those who were actually needed assistance. In the research for this project it became clear that it often was difficult to get some parents of underperforming children to even attend parent/teacher meetings. These children can have the worst attendance and punctuality records.

To quote again from the recent OFSED report<sup>14</sup>.

***"Parenting style: This factor emerges in recent research as the single largest domain explaining the poorer cognitive performance of low income children relative to middle income children, accounting for 19% of the gap in mathematics, 21% of the gap in literacy and 33% of the gap in language. A particularly important factor included in the parenting style domain is maternal sensitivity and responsiveness (sometimes called nurturance). Other factors include knowledge of infant development, discipline and rules. Developmental psychologists have long emphasised the importance of sensitive and responsive parenting for child development and this analysis shows that this one aspect of parenting style accounts for 11% of the gaps in literacy and maths between low and middle income children and 21% of gap in language skills between these two groups"***

In essence if we want to tackle both educational underachievement and also counter socio-economic disadvantage, intervention in the early years is pivotal. Given that Educational Underachievement is especially prevalent in economically deprived areas it would seem reasonable to target programmes specifically towards these areas. This is currently being done through the 'Surestart' programme for the most economically disadvantaged wards in Northern Ireland. One particular problem with this model is where there are pockets of deprivation in District Electoral Wards (DEAs) [which are otherwise affluent] those pockets are not eligible because of the overall level of socio-economic deprivation measured within the entirety of the DEA.

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<sup>14</sup>[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/379157/Unseen\\_20children\\_20-20access\\_20and\\_20achievement\\_2020\\_20years\\_20on.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/379157/Unseen_20children_20-20access_20and_20achievement_2020_20years_20on.pdf)

There is a role for both the Government and Community in tackling this and better education programmes to make parents aware of the impact of simple interventions could improve results.

We know from the research that the barriers to succeeding are not necessarily economic per se. Children's reading books, for example, cost very little and are available free at libraries, time [reading to a child] in itself costs nothing to parents. The impact of small parental interventions can have a massive effect.

For example in the report Books before Bedtime<sup>15</sup>

***"Research which shows that children who read outside of class are 13 times more likely to read above the expected level for their age."***

From the same report we learn that despite the clearly very positive effects of the above, in a sample of 1,000 parents with children aged 6-11, almost half (44%) are never read to at home.

Save the Children in its recent report Read on, Get On<sup>16</sup> found that in England

***"Four out of ten children on free school meals are not able to read well by the age of 11"***

The organisation Early Moments<sup>17</sup> highlights some crucial benefits from reading, especially to 0-3 year olds

1. A stronger relationship with you.
2. Academic excellence
3. Basic speech skills.
4. The basics of how to read a book.
5. Better communication skills.
6. Mastery of language.
7. More logical thinking skills
8. Acclimation to new experiences
9. Enhanced concentration and discipline.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Australia<sup>18</sup> cite the following

***"The frequency of reading to children at a young age has a direct causal effect on their schooling outcomes regardless of their family background and home environment. Reading to them 6-7 days per week has the same effect as them being almost 12 months older"***

This is well known and documented research. In essence if we could get parents to read to their child very night for ten to fifteen minutes it could significantly improve our children's development but also massively reduce Educational Underachievement.

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<sup>15</sup><http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/news/5578> report shows just ten minutes reading a day boosts school achievement

<sup>16</sup>[https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/Read\\_On\\_Get\\_On.pdf](https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/Read_On_Get_On.pdf)

<sup>17</sup><https://www.earlymoments.com/promoting-literacy-and-a-love-of-reading/why-reading-to-children-is-important/>

<sup>18</sup><http://www.education.vic.gov.au/documents/about/research/readtoyoungchild.pdf>

Even 'The Sun' newspaper took up this cause, trying to encourage parents to read to their children for just 10 minutes before bedtime. The impacts of this simple action are incredibly significant. It may be possible that parents are not aware of the benefits of these simple social interactions, or they struggle with reading themselves or they do know the benefits and choose to ignore them.

There should be a policy driven campaign on literacy [in NI this could be led through co-operation between the Departments of Education, Health and Communities] and the simplest model is the '**10 minute before bedtime**' that work and research has already gone into. Thought should also be given to the targeted nature of such a campaign, an effective video promoted on Facebook for example could be a high impact yet low cost intervention targeted towards parents.



*"We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard"*

**John F Kennedy**

## **2. Lack of male role models**

Ashley (2002) articulated the impact of male role models within an educational context in what he refers to as 'crude, common sense' he said,

***"If boys see men reading books and doing lots of neat writing, then boys will avidly read books and produce volumes of neat writing".***

Unfortunately these circumstances are often not the case and it is accepted that many kids who suffer from educational and social underdevelopment are from single parent families and are being brought up by the mother with little impact [either positive or negative] from the father.



A Primary School Principal,

***"We also need to address the politically incorrect issue of children from single-parent homes. Many protestant working-class boys are being brought up by young single mums and their only male role models are those with paramilitary links"***

Creating positive role models for young boys is incredibly important as it is natural they will search for older males and will frequently adopt values and behaviour from them. Clearly this can be both positive and negative.

There is no direct impact that Government can have here but sound policy can positively influence. One example of this is by encouraging more males into primary school teaching. Links can be developed between older boys in Secondary/Grammar schools and local Primary schools. Small amounts of funding could be put into a pilot programme to encourage this and then evaluated to determine impacts. Simple things like older boys reading to the Primary School aged boys, playing sports with them and giving them simple words of encouragement can have positive impacts. This could be an effective low cost intervention for those schools willing to become involved in such projects.

Male classroom assistants could play a significant role in addressing the male role model deficit and further work could be done to encourage them to apply for such posts. A more attractive salary for classroom assistants and a better career path could attract more men into this job.

### 3. Environmental Influences

Many of those most affected by underachievement come from the Protestant community. This fact has been well trailed since 2014 with the most recent report from the Equality Commission in 2015<sup>19</sup> stating

***“for all years from 2007 and 2012, boys - especially Protestant boys - and pupils from less well-off families were less likely than other groups to achieve the highest Key Stage 2, 3, GCSE, and A Level results than other pupils”.***

We also know that **Protestant boys on Free School Meals** perform very badly ranking at 38<sup>th</sup> out of 40 categories. The following table from research done by the Community Relations Council,

Category	% Achieving at least 5 good GCSE grades
1 Chinese Girls Non-FSME (Free School Meal Entitlement)	81.4
2 NI Catholic Girls - Non FSME	76.7
3 Chinese	76.4
4 Chinese Girls - FSME	73.6
5 Chinese Boys - Non FSME	72.6
6 NI Protestant Girls - Non FSME	71.8
7 Asian Girls - Non FSME	70.7
8 White and Asian	67.9
9 White Girls - Non FSME	67.3
10 Irish (in England)	66.9
11 NI Catholic Boys - Non FSME	64.5
12 Black Girls - Non FSME	64.2
13 Asian	62.7
14 Chinese Boys - FSME	62.4
15 Any other mixed background	62.3
16 Northern Ireland - All students	62
17 Asian Boys - Non FSME	61.4
18 Mixed	59.8
19 White and Black African	59.6
20 All students - England	58.8
21 NI Protestant Boys - Non FSME	58.6
22 White	58.6
23 White Boys - Non FSME	57.6
24 Asian Girls - FSME	55.2
25 Black	54.6
26 Black Boys - Non FSME	53.2
27 Any other white background	52.8
28 Northern Ireland Ethnic Minority	52.7
29 White and Black Caribbean	52.5
30 Black Girls - FSME	50.7
31 Asian Boys - FSME	48.3
32 Northern Ireland Catholic Girls - FSME	43.8
33 Black Boys - FSME	40.3
34 White Girls - FSME	35.1
35 NI Catholic Boys - FSME	33.2
36 NI Protestant Girls- Non FSME	32.4
37 White Boys	26.9
38 NI Protestant Boys - FSME	19.7
39 Traveller of Irish Heritage	16.7
40 Gypsy / Roma	9.7

Community is key in this as many ‘hard to reach’ parents are either suspicious of or mistrusting of ‘formal authority’ such as teachers, health visitors and social workers.

<sup>19</sup><http://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/EducationInequality-ChildrensSummaryQUB.pdf>

Thought should be given to how the community within these socially disadvantaged areas can be supported and encouraged to help mitigate this problem. It should also be noted that this is not exclusively a 'Protestant problem'. These figures were published recently which demonstrates that more Catholic FSM Boys were failing but the percentage failure rate was higher for Protestant FSM Boys.

#### **% and Numbers of FSME Boys Securing 5 'Good' GCSEs**

	<b>Protestant Boys</b>		<b>Catholic Boys</b>	
2007/08	12.2%	66/542	26.6%	312/1174
2008/09	18.8%	102/544	29.4%	332/1128
2009/10	20.3%	101/497	28.2%	331/1173
2010/11	18.6%	103/553	31.3%	405/1293
2011/12	19.7%	116/590	33.2%	415/1251
2012/13	25.0%	144/576	33.8%	452/1338
2013/14	22.1%	130/587	32.0%	428/1337
2014/15	26.7%	213/797	39.9%	672/1684
	20.8%	975/4,686	32.2%	3,347/10,378
<b>Number of boys failing to secure 5 'good' GCSEs</b>		<b>3,711</b>		<b>7,031</b>

These figures should therefore prompt the question why do Catholic boys attain at a level 13% above their FSM Protestant counterparts?

In a report entitled Education Inequalities in Northern Ireland<sup>20</sup> by Burns, Leitch and Hughes (2015) from Queens University state,

***“Given that any young people who are entitled to free school meals have lower proportions of attainment and progression than those who are not, the particular barriers to educational equality for Protestant males must be considered closely – in other words, the question of why their attainment is so far behind Catholic males or Protestant females who are entitled to free school meals must be considered and addressed”***

They go on to give their own qualitative analysis of the reasons behind this including,

1. Intergenerational mistrust and negativity towards the benefits of education
2. The divided nature of the school system in Northern Ireland and lower post 16 provision in controlled schools
3. A lack of male working-class role models in schools
4. A weakened community infrastructure in urban Protestant areas in particular.

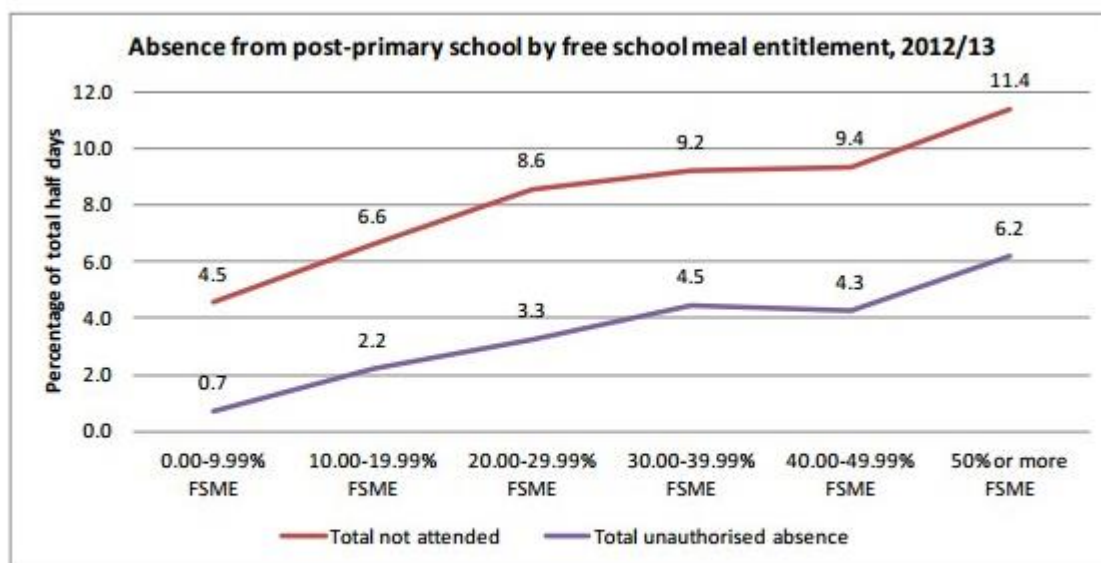
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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/EducationInequality-SummaryReport.pdf>

#### 4. Specific School issues - Attendance and Punctuality

Apart from the quality of teaching and learning, to be detailed later, attendance and punctuality are key in raising attainment. The burden for addressing this is shared between the school and the parents. The Education Welfare Service is only called in when attendance drops to under 85%. If we believe that some parents either don't know or don't care about the importance of school attendance then this must be reinforced to them. The Department of Education published a report in May 2012, which found that more than 40% of schools surveyed (at that point) did not have an attendance policy in place and only 64% of schools had a target for school attendance in their school development plan.<sup>21</sup> The NI Audit Office in their report on the issue in 2014 stated that:

***“Levels of average absence and unauthorised absence of post primary pupils increase steadily between Year 8 and Year 11. This pattern in attendance is reflected in pupils’ achievement - by Key Stage 3, more than one in five does not achieve the expected standard in literacy and numeracy. By GCSE, two in five do not achieve the standards deemed necessary to progress to sixth form studies at school; further education; training; or step onto the employment ladder”***



Source: Attendance at grant-aided primary, post-primary and special schools 2012-13 (NISRA)

<sup>21</sup>[http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/niao\\_pupils\\_attendance.pdf](http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/niao_pupils_attendance.pdf)



There are a number of simple steps which can be adopted to see this particular issue addressed. These should be a priority for both Schools and the Department of Education,

1. Early intervention can prevent patterns of non-attendance from emerging. This is in effect linked with point four below that schools should have both an effective way of tracking pupil attendance and a rigorous strategy for dealing with it.
2. A strong pastoral ethos helps to instill a sense of pride and belonging in pupils. This needs to be lead from the front by the Principal – this very much sets the 'cultural' tone of the school.
3. The school attendance policy must both promote the importance of attendance at school and deal effectively with non-attendance.
4. Lateness is also an issue and there should be clear and effective policies in place in every school to deal with this.
5. Effective use of attendance data can help to prevent persistent non-attendance at school. Simple recording systems which feed to a member of school staff can be used to flag up problems before they become issues.
6. A key role in training for school leaders should be to provide a model for and encourage a robust school level approach to encouraging, tracking and monitoring pupil attendance and punctuality from P1 onwards. This can be a crucial step taken early in the school life of a child which raises the bar of expectation for some parents who need guidance and support to help meet the needs of their children.

Two school Principals highlighted, as part of the research for this report, the pressure that Educational Welfare Officers are under and that further resourcing in this area could be a useful, forward thinking strategy.

## 5. Quality of Teaching and Learning

Teaching like every other profession has a range of abilities within its workforce. Clearly the vast majority of teachers are excellent in their job, both motivating and developing our children. It must also be accepted that there is a small minority who are not performing to accepted standards and can even be demotivating for children. Primarily it is the responsibility of the Principal to ensure rising standards within schools and the duty of the Board of Governors to hold them to account.

One Principal simply stated that,

***"Poor teaching and [parental] apathy are the reasons for [Protestant] underachievement"***

Affecting school culture at a leadership level is crucial. The school must try to make up the expectation gap that exists in many working class communities, and that starts with ensuring the same level of standards apply in terms of teaching and learning practice and assessment/ grade performance expectation as would be the case in other schools. That in itself is a sizable challenge. A number of strategies could be looked at as part of a pilot project.

The last ETI report by the Chief Inspector for 2012-14 indicated a number of measures which could be implemented. She also commented that, in a school setting there is

***"a clear link between high expectations and high achievement"***<sup>22</sup>

***"In post-primary, GCSE outcomes are rising marginally, yet attainment is variable across schools; poor standards can be linked to low aspirations both within the school and outside of it"***

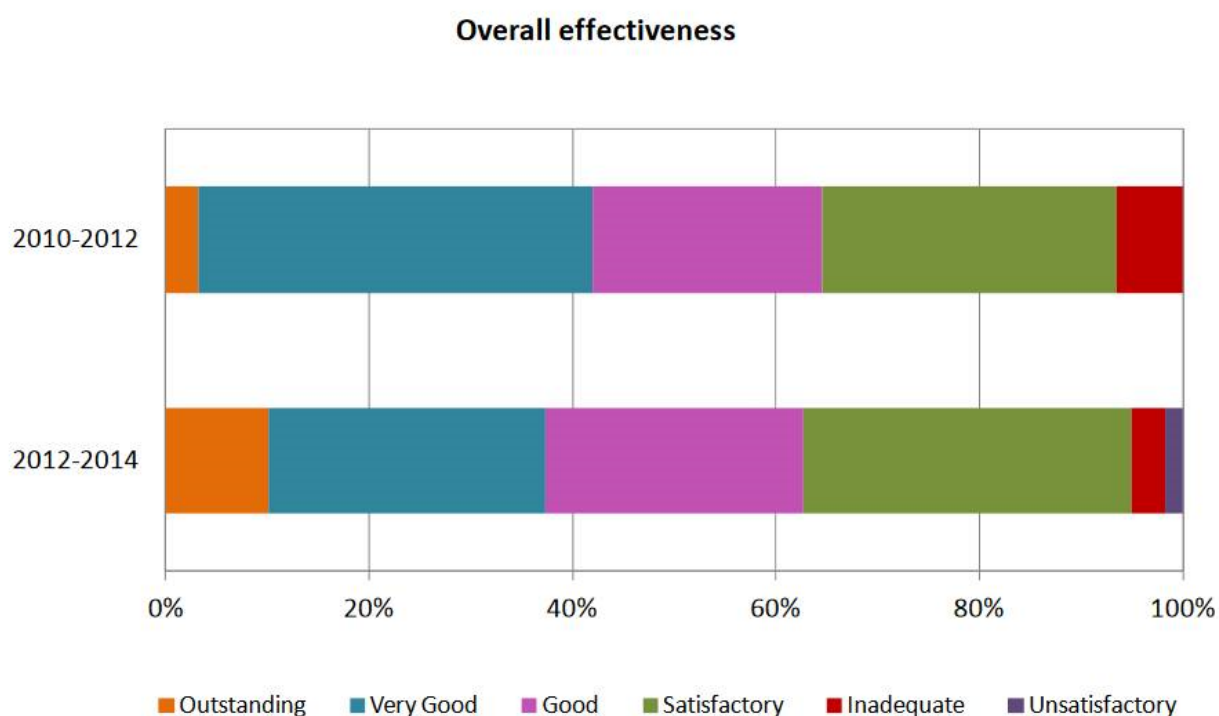
The last points simply confirms that which we already know that a holistic approach is required to combat under achievement. In the Post Primary Sector ETI found the following,

### **Going forward**

- Overall effectiveness needs to improve in the 37% of post-primary schools inspected which were evaluated as less than good.
- The quality and effectiveness of the 22% of lessons observed requires improvement, as do assessment of, and for, learning and the use of ICT by pupils to support their learning.
- Despite the fact that school leadership at senior level, school development planning and action to effect improvement are improving, leadership at all levels, and particularly in middle management, requires further improvement through effective staff development.
- It remains a priority to raise the inadequate achievements and standards in 15% of schools inspected and the GCSE outcomes for pupils entitled to FSM and in particular, boys in non-grammar, controlled schools.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/inspection-reports/the-chief-inspectors-report/ci-report-2012-2014.pdf>

Clearly there are big challenges here, especially given the facts that 37% of post Primary Schools are either just 'satisfactory' or below that grade. The table below shows the overall effectiveness in the Post Primary sector and whilst we should be happy that in over 60% of schools the results are very positive there is significant work to be done in a number of Post Primary schools.



'Accelerated Reader' is a particular scheme which is considered to be effective and has been employed by some schools in Northern Ireland. Post evaluation by the Education Endowment Foundation<sup>23</sup> it found the following

1. Accelerated Reader appears to be effective for weaker readers as a catch-up intervention at the start of secondary school.
2. A well-stocked library with a wide collection of books banded according to the Accelerated Reader readability formula, and easy access to computers with internet connection, are the main requirements for successful implementation.
3. Pupils at very low levels of reading may not be independent readers and would need initial support from teacher to start reading books.
4. Schools can lead robust evaluations of their own planned interventions, under favourable circumstances, and with some advice and oversight from expert evaluators.

One teacher who provided me with some specific feedback on the scheme stated that it cost about £450 for 17 weekly coaching sessions. After completion of the programme the reading age across the 12 boys had increased by 11 months within a 7 month period, a good result.

<sup>23</sup> <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evaluation/projects/accelerated-reader/>

## 6. Leadership and Governance in Schools

Schools in the Controlled Sector are managed by the Boards of Governors and funded by the Education Authority. Boards of Governors consist of representatives of transferors - along with representatives of parents, teachers and the EA. Clearly the relationship they have with the Principal and Senior Management Team of the school is critical.

The following is from an NI Assembly Briefing paper on School Governors<sup>24</sup>

**Table 2: Areas where Boards of Governors have roles and responsibilities**

Area of governance	Roles and responsibilities
Strategic governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting the school's vision and aims</li> <li>• Establishing and maintaining the school's ethos</li> <li>• Setting the school's plans and policies</li> <li>• Monitoring and evaluating school performance</li> <li>• Promoting self-evaluation to sustain school improvement</li> </ul>
Corporate governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School performance measures</li> <li>• Curriculum planning</li> <li>• Employment issues</li> <li>• Pupil pastoral care and protection issues</li> <li>• Publication of information regarding the school and its pupils</li> <li>• Managing school premises and relations with the community</li> </ul>
Promoting good governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being a critical friend</li> <li>• Supporting pupils, parents and staff</li> </ul>

Some of the roles and responsibilities above are key to tackling this problem. Governors in schools, particularly in the Controlled Sector, need to ensure that Principals are continually improving key outputs within the school. If the sector is going to be serious about dealing with this issue they need to be able to clearly track both a child's performance and any associated issues with the child. Governors should be ensuring that priority should be given to systems which enable assessment at Primary 1 induction and then allow comprehensive tracking though the child's Primary years. Early identification is one the key factors in dealing with this issue.

<sup>24</sup><http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2011/Education/8611.pdf>

Recruiting the right leader for a school is pivotal in forming the appropriate learning culture. The Guardian newspaper highlighted the difficulties that some schools were having in this regard. They cited a report from the National Governors' Association where they said that

***"43% of Boards who recruited senior staff in 2015 said it had been difficult to find good candidates"***<sup>25</sup>

Every single Principal and Teacher who have been consulted in the preparation of this report said that School Leadership was absolutely central to addressing educational underachievement. In its 2010-12 report ETI stated the following<sup>26</sup>,

***"Tackling educational underachievement and raising standards, especially for lower achievers, is a key principle of the DE ESaGS policy. Given that school leaders have a key role in bringing about improvement for all learners, the goal of developing achievement-oriented school leadership needs to attract the highest, most urgent priority in the design and provision of any school teacher and leader development programme."***

Then the 2012-14 ETI report<sup>27</sup> in terms of Post Primary the Chief Inspector said that

***"In the 34% of schools inspected where leadership and management needed to improve, the actions to effect improvement, including effective use of data and first-hand classroom observation, were undermined by ineffective communication and a lack of a shared vision that focused on pupil-centred values."***

Communication issues and lack of shared vision are very often concurrent problems in organisations. A strong, envisioned and well-motivated leader is very often the solution. Better training would assist future senior teachers to prepare for leading a school. This has been highlighted a number of times by ETI. In March this year the previous Education Minister John O'Dowd launched the Learning Leaders - A Strategy For Teacher Professional Learning which set out a new framework to address some of the problem areas, especially with ongoing Continuous Professional Development within teaching. It also contains the following statement

***"The Department will expect the EA to commission, in consultation with key stakeholders, alternative models for leadership professional learning aimed at building leadership capacity at all levels."***



<sup>25</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/jan/26/english-schools-struggling-to-recruit-headteachers-research-finds>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/surveys-evaluations/surveys-evaluations-post-primary/surveys-evaluations-post-primary-2013/preparing-school-principals-to-be-effective-leaders.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/inspection-reports/the-chief-inspectors-report/ci-report-2012-2014.pdf>

As part of the research for this report one organisation worth highlighting in terms of the building leadership capacity within schools is the Future Leaders Trust. Their core beliefs mirror the attitude which our leaders need to have.

## **Our Core Beliefs**

### **Every child**

All children can be successful, regardless of their background

### **No excuses**

Every excuse is a step on the road to failure

### **High expectations**

Children, staff, schools and communities will live up to the expectations placed upon them

### **Lead learning**

The most important things that happen in schools happen in classrooms

### **No islands**

When great school leaders work together, anything is possible

These simple values should be enshrined in each of our schools in Northern Ireland.

## ***7. Piecemeal adoption of Best Practice***

There are a number of schools in both the Controlled and Maintained Sector which are effectively and inventively dealing with concurrent socio-economic problems and educational underachievement. There are some schools which are already sharing this best practice but this should be encouraged across the sector, possibly in a more formalised way. Many schools are struggling to deal with the issue across Northern Ireland but whilst there are a number of small school clusters these are often organized in an ad hoc way. Information sharing is key here and there is a willingness amongst both sectors (Controlled and Maintained) to share knowledge and good practice. This could be harnessed through a conference where some of this knowledge is brought together and links can be made.

- Simple reward systems that are achievable for all pupils can be very effective and easy to replicate.
- Information on tracking attendance and pupil progress can be shared.
- Inventive ways of encouraging attendance and dealing with poor attendance could also be replicated in schools.
- Methods of successful school engagement with other sectors such as business and community can be shared.



## 8. Attachment Disorders

Judy Furnivall from the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services wrote a paper called Attachment Informed Practice with looked after children and young people<sup>28</sup> in which she outlines the problems and some solutions. To a degree her research confirms much that we already know,

***“Although attachment is significant throughout the life span, the special bond that develops between an infant and primary caregiver in the first year of life is usually seen as the template for future relationship experiences. Infants experience this bond as their main source of safety, comfort and pleasure and show intense distress when this relationship is lost, even for a brief period. When children are anxious or distressed they will seek proximity to and comfort from their attachment figures”***

The importance of attachment theory is then outlined and when effective attachment has not taken place between mother and baby,

***“Recent evidence from neuroscience confirms the importance of the early emotional and social experience of infants for the healthy development of their brains. Maltreatment can disturb the patterns of cortisol (stress hormone) secretion which can affect immediate and long term mental and physical health”.***



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<sup>28</sup>[http://www.iriss.org.uk/sites/default/files/iriss\\_insight10.pdf](http://www.iriss.org.uk/sites/default/files/iriss_insight10.pdf)



The impact of poor or non-existent attachment is then discussed where, in later life the children, now in primary or post primary are much more likely to show aggression or exhibit anti-social behaviour. From a policy context it would appear that some proactive action to address this would actually prevent problems in later life for many of these children. Furnivall continues,

***“Recent evidence suggests that secure attachment in infancy may help toddlers to manage the inevitable assertion of parental power that accompanies the socialisation process of young children. Conversely, insecurely attached children are more likely to embark on a mutually adversarial pathway in which children’s resentful opposition to parental demands evokes increased coercion from parents and ultimately an increase in antisocial behaviour and aggression from children (Kochanska et al, 2009).”***

There is clearly some overlap here between the responsibilities of the Department of Health, Education & Community to address these specific problems.

A fairly recent intervention which has been very effective in tackling attachment disorders has been the Nurture Unit Project. To quote from the Department of Education’s own material

***“Nurture groups are an in-school, teacher led psychosocial intervention involving small groups of around 5 to 10 children (typically P1 –P3) who are experiencing social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, arising from attachment difficulties in early childhood, which has impacted their levels of trust, self esteem, confidence and resilience, and subsequently their ability to learn.”***

These were initially funded through the Department for Social Development (DSD) under the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme. Then in 2013, 20 new nurture groups were set up as the Signature Project under the Delivering Social Change Programme, this was delivered jointly by DSD and DE. DSD and DE also provided additional funding for 10 longer running nurture groups, to run parallel with the Signature Project. The Nurture Unit Project demonstrates how fairly minor interventions can have a significant impact on attachment disorders as evidenced by the recent Education and Training Inspectorates report<sup>29</sup>.

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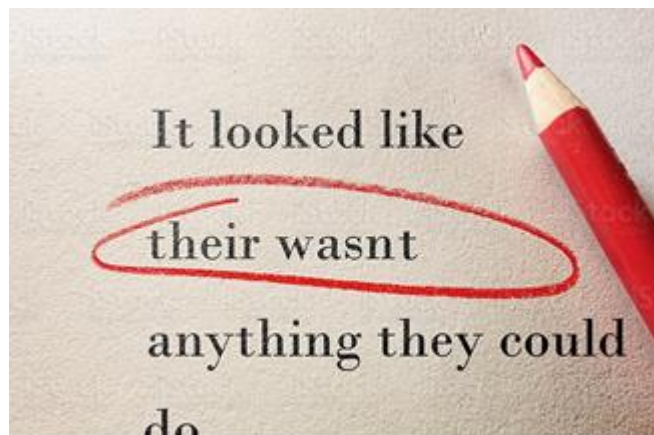
<sup>29</sup> <http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/surveys-evaluations/surveys-evaluations-primary/surveys-evaluations-primary-2016/evaluation-of-the-nurture-unit-signature-project-pilot.htm>

## 9. Parental Literacy & Numeracy

The Northern Ireland Audit Office in its report Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Schools states the following<sup>30</sup>

***"Research consistently indicates that the home learning environment is a crucial factor in predicting, and developing, children's literacy and numeracy skills and their future life chances. Parents are a child's first educator. A child's family and home environment has a strong impact on his/her language, literacy and numeracy development and educational achievement"***

The fact is that many parents struggle with their own literacy and numeracy. This can lead to them avoiding this area in the home environment and this immediately puts them at a big disadvantage when trying to help their children with homework or even read to them. More serious than this however is that they will be unlikely to read to their children from an early age [1-2] because they struggle with this themselves. This can also, by association, strike a negative view of education and learning in the home. Whilst conducting research for this report many people have said that there is a 'real fear' of going back to education to improve literacy and numeracy skills. Colleges in Northern Ireland do offer starter courses but getting over the mental barrier to enroll on such courses is tough. Childcare for some single mums can also be an issue.



One Community Worker said,

***"Adults hide the fact they can't read. They freely admit they are rubbish at Mathematics, but there is a stigma with reading. Therefore they would often hide this shortcoming from their children and not engage in reading"***

Great work is being done in the sector already with, for example, the Training Woman's Network offering cross community support for women who want to improve their key skills, many of whom are single parent mums bringing up children. Breaking down the stigma attached to poor reading skills is also an important step in engagement with this key demographic.

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<sup>30</sup> [http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/literacy\\_and\\_numeracy\\_2.pdf](http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/literacy_and_numeracy_2.pdf)

## Recommendations

This report seeks to clarify into one document some sound practice and policy ideas which could be adopted by the Northern Ireland Executive through an inter-departmental approach. This could be led primarily by the Department of Education but could also involve input and funding from the Department of Health and Communities. There are a number of possible aspects that could be taken forward:

Recommendation	Timescale	Revenue Cost
Ensure that early intervention in pupil non-attendance is adopted by schools as a priority issue.	Short Term	None
Ensure a rigorous absence policy is adopted by schools.	Short Term	None
A fresh look at the Leadership training provided for Pre and Post Primary Principals, especially in areas of socio-economic deprivation.	Short Term	Low
Boards of Governors should consider asking Principals to undertake the <b>Ron Mirr Self Evaluation Questionnaire</b> for their school.	Short Term	None
Consideration to be given to a Northern Ireland Educational Underachievement Conference which would facilitate the sharing of best practice amongst school leaders.	Short Term	Low
A social media based literacy campaign could encourage children and parents to read together.	Short / Medium Term	Low
Address low parental expectations and aspirations through a specific ongoing educational campaign.	Short / Medium Term	Low / Medium
Encourage partnerships between Primary schools in areas of socio-economic need and Post primary schools where male pupils interact and read with Primary pupils.	Short / Medium Term	None
Consideration should be given to the future of the Nurture Unit Project which is currently being formally evaluated in terms of its impact. Continuation of such a project could be a valuable and fiscally sound early intervention for attachment disorders.	Short / Medium	Medium
Schools should be encouraged to adopt further links with both the Community, Voluntary and Business sectors. This could facilitate sponsorship or joint working on specific projects.	Short / Medium	None

One final consideration is the importance of effective evaluation of the above recommendations if any can be adopted. Clearly we need to be funding interventions that can be proven to work rather than those that do not. This is a problem that can be reduced with a range of properly targeted interventions. Educational Underachievement can be tackled in Northern Ireland with a willingness to address the underlying causes and deal with the symptoms. I honestly believe that no step taken forward to address this issue is too small.

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