

**Education, Children and Young People Committee**  
**Scottish Attainment Challenge inquiry**  
**Informal engagement with parents and carers**

**Online**

**Wednesday 27 April 2022**

**Note of meeting**

**Purpose of the session**

This engagement session was arranged to allow Committee members to hear directly from parents and carers about their experiences of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

The Committee agreed to take evidence from case-study local authority areas involving witnesses from primary schools, secondary schools, and local authority representatives from the selected areas.

The Scottish Attainment Challenge is intended to provide significant autonomy to local authorities and schools and there will be a multitude of approaches within localities. Local authorities are grouped regionally in 'Regional Improvement Collaboratives' (RIC). Scrutiny of the Scottish Attainment Challenge at the level of a RIC will allow the Committee to compare different local authorities and how they work together and with Education Scotland.

The Committee agreed that the West Partnership RIC, which consists of eight local authorities across the west of Scotland: East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Glasgow City, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire, and West Dunbartonshire, form the case study area for this inquiry. Thirty-five percent of Scotland's school population attend a West Partnership school. There are over 1000 nurseries, primary, secondary and special schools in the West Partnership, serving mainly urban but also many rural communities.

The parents and carers attending this event have children and young people at schools within the West Partnership Area.

**Notes of meetings**

The parents and carers were split into three groups and notes were taken of each discussion. These notes are attached in the annexe.

## **Annexe: notes of discussions**

### **GROUP ONE**

Stephen Kerr MSP (Convener) and Ruth Maguire MSP were joined by seven parents in this group.

#### **What support has been received?**

Parents spoke of a number learning interventions, such as one-to-one support and additional support in small groups. Flexibility and meeting the needs of children are seen as being key, with a wide variety of options available.

Before the PEF funding was available, one parent described their child's school as being 'neglected'; new books were purchased with the funding and training provided to teachers. Previously, the books were childish and old-fashioned.

More action was needed on raising attainment following the pandemic, such as extra teachers to provide assistance; this has been funded by PEF, both in and after school.

Schools are good at identifying who needs extra help and providing it; they know the strengths and weaknesses of the children and how to target increased support available due to PEF.

Parents highlighted that PEF funding has been used for:

- extra teachers to keep class sizes smaller and avoid having composite classes;
- extra sports and maths equipment;
- to provide a breakfast trolley for the children – as the school is in an area of high deprivation;
- to provide maths breakfast clubs;
- to provide books to read at home;
- to provide devices for everyone during the pandemic;
- to provide waterproofs for outdoor play;
- training for teachers to support them in providing online learning

Numeracy and literacy interventions have also been made available. One parent spoke of additional support through smaller groups for one-to-one activities such as literacy; without that additional support the child would be behind with their learning. There are no issues with the child feeling 'singled out' in receiving additional support and good feedback is provided to the parents. Another parent spoke of additional classes with one-to-one attention for pupils.

During lockdown, support was available to parents in getting their children to do schoolwork at home; one child got a place at a school hub a couple of days per week as they struggled to engage with the work at home.

One parent spoke of having children with autism who have been well supported; they have attended the same school since nursery and staff know them really well. Enhanced transition from nursery to primary school was offered; the whole family feels very supported by the school. A Communication Unit was set up at the school and the child was able to spend some time in the unit, and some time in the mainstream school.

One parent spoke of a child who has a genetic condition; they started primary one during the pandemic, which was really stressful and worrying. The headteacher communicated direct with the parent to arrange support. The parent spoke of outdoor activities arranged around literacy and numeracy activities; the headteacher still checks in with the parent by phone and the parent feels very included.

Parents highlighted the importance of non-academic opportunities. One parent spoke of Tigers Construction Academy which came into the school to offer onsite practical skills; this was funded by PEF; initiatives like this can encourage young people to stay on at school.

One parent spoke of a child in primary seven who was getting bored and 'playing up'. Support has been provided by the school which lets the parents know when the child needs challenge in their learning (through buddying, etc); such interventions have 'put him on the right path'. Key to this is quality interventions with staff being inclusive and parents feeling involved.

One parent spoke of outdoor learning, such as forest schools, which has been supported by attainment challenge funds; this teaches important life skills.

### **Exam support**

Some parents mentioned after school classes at exam time and PEF funding being used to encourage children to study, including extra intensive study days over Easter. Masterclasses have been provided on the day before exams; these are additional to Easter school.

### **Digital devices**

One parent said that both their children had been given digital devices by the school. One parent said that PEF had been used to purchase more digital devices for the school.

### **Support for transitions**

One child moved schools mid-way through primary seven; there were many issues relating to this. The school was 'very on the ball'; they listened to concerns and put the child in smaller maths and literacy classes to help with the transition.

One parent spoke of a Principal Teacher being put in place to help children make the transition into S1; this was funded by PEF.

### **Mental health and wellbeing**

Scottish Attainment Challenge funds have paid for health and wellbeing support in schools. This has been 'heavily used' post-pandemic. Wellbeing work included extra training on 'nurture' provision and staff training on counselling. 'Nurture' comprises small nurture groups in schools. One parent spoke of a wellbeing class, which is run by a guidance teacher and is very accessible. In some schools, trained counsellors have been provided.

One parent spoke of a child with mental health problems; they couldn't access the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service or counselling at the school. That parent would like better mental health support at primary school for younger children.

Some spoke of mental health support being provided through schools to parents when needed.

### **Financial assistance to families**

Parents spoke of teachers seeking to respond to the needs of their children and young people and looking at different ways to help them and their families.

Some parents spoke of PEF being used to help struggling families where the headteacher will provide funds or vouchers. One parent was in a financial bind prior to Christmas; the school responded by providing vouchers for winter jackets for both children. There is a feeling that the school will provide such help when needed. One parent spoke of the school providing assistance to buy toys, etc for the children at Christmas when struggling financially; support was provided whilst the family was going through difficult times.

### **What happens next?**

Some parents voiced concern regarding what happens when the funds run low and run down and additional support teachers will not be available anymore. For example, one parent spoke of a child in need of extra help with attachment issues; 'how can we ensure that this type of help continues to be made available?' One parent spoke of PEF paying for two additional members of staff at their local school; when the funding is not available anymore those staff will be re-allocated across the council area and this is a worry.

## **GROUP TWO**

Michael Marra MSP and Bob Doris MSP spoke to seven parents of children attending schools within local authorities in the West Partnership.

### **Support accessed through Attainment Scotland Fund**

The group discussed the types of support that they or their children had accessed which had been funded through the Attainment Scotland Fund. The types of support were:

- Access to counselling service in a primary school.  
The links to other services, such as the Educational Psychologists and the timely and ongoing support were praised by the parent.
- Additional staffing, including—
  - Classroom assistants, ASN specialists were particularly mentioned.
  - Staff to support a 'nurture' approach.
  - A 'leader of literacy' post which provided both targeted and universal literacy support.
  - Behaviour specialists to support teachers with approaches to support children with challenging behaviour.
  - Health and wellbeing coach, to support access to school clubs and sport.
- A 'soft start', which allowed children to start school 15 minutes earlier to allow them to settle in.
- Improved play-ground equipment.

### **Role of parents**

Generally, the parents reported that headteachers were consulting and informing parents about how the PEF funds were being used, often through the parent council. The parents stated that the headteachers were leaders of learning in their schools, and they listened to (and acted on) feedback from parent councils.

### **Evolution of programmes**

Some parents who had experience of the early use of PEF suggested that, initially, it was not always targeted correctly. This has improved, however.

Parents indicated that the leadership team monitor and evaluate the impact of interventions and report on this. One parent gave an example where an intervention was discontinued and the money used for different purposes as the initial intervention was not working as intended.

The quality of online teaching tools was complimented.

## **Measuring progress**

The group agreed that literacy and numeracy scores are not the only measures of progress. Although it was noted that it can be harder to measure other aspects of the work, such as improving health and wellbeing or engagement in learning.

## **What could improve?**

### *Additional Support for Learning (ASL)*

The approach to supporting pupils who have complex additional support needs (ASN) was highlighted as an area for improvement. One parent noted the correlation between areas of high deprivation and the number of pupils with ASN. Another gave an example of a parent paying for specialist training for the school teachers to understand how to support their child's condition. Another described a general dissatisfaction with ASL.

### *Sharing practice*

The group thought that greater sharing of best practice between schools and professionals would be beneficial. The group also would like more opportunities for parents from different schools to discuss their experiences and learn from each other.

### *Consistency*

Some of the group suggested that the consistency in staffing interventions could be improved. They described staff who are working with individuals moving on, meaning that building relationships and trust must begin again.

## **Impacts of the pandemic**

The group appreciated the work of teachers through the pandemic in teaching and maintaining relationships with pupils and families under difficult circumstances. Schools worked to get additional materials to families that needed it.

The distribution of digital devices to those that needed them was also praised, although there were some teething problems early in the pandemic about which online platforms could be used.

A parent of a child in early primary noted that the richness of the experience in early learning and childcare (ELC) settings had been affected by the pandemic. One parent suggested that their second child's progress was slower after their P1 year was impacted by lockdowns. However, that parent also reported that the child appeared to be responding well and 'catching up' with the support of additional staff.

The parents also noted that the pandemic had impacted in the opportunities to engage and be involved with the life of the school. Parents of pupils whose eldest children are in P1 or P2 will not have experienced the school community where parents were physically present and active in the school. The group argued that recovery should include plans to support parental engagement.

## **GROUP 3**

Oliver Mundell MSP and Bob Doris MSP spoke to eight parents of children attending schools within two local authorities in the West Partnership.

### **Support for Families**

The group were asked what support they had received in or out of school. One parent mentioned free school meals throughout holidays and continual provision of clothing grants as making a big difference to many families within their school.

One parent said they felt their child had been very well supported by their school. Their child, who had additional support needs (ASN), had a family support worker in school and this had been hugely beneficial. The parent also noted that teachers had taken extra time to support them, for example, by giving them a weekly update on how their child had been in class that week.

Another parent spoke very highly of a support worker who had been a good link to further support, such as advice on benefit entitlement. The positive impact of the support worker had gone beyond their child's education and helped their family as a whole. Before the help of the support worker, the parent stated they were unaware about what support was available.

Another parent spoke highly of the 'Step Up Programme' which linked the primary school to the secondary school. For their child, this programme had made a significant difference. They also spoke of their other child who had been diagnosed with dyslexia. The parent praised the school in their approach, stating that nothing had changed with the diagnosis as the support was already in place. The parent also talked about specialist provision for children with ASN. Previously, they felt that their child could not get the support they needed at school and were left with significant gaps in their learning. Owing to medical needs, their child had around 50% attendance at school which had a huge impact on their learning. In response to this, the school worked closely with their child to fill in those gaps, particularly in numeracy. The parent stated that the teachers played to their child's strengths and overall, the school had been 'fantastic'.

One parent spoke of their experiences of secondary schooling throughout the closure of schools owing to public health restrictions. They noted that the school had provided a lot of support during the first lockdown and delivered a full timetable online. This year had been different, however. The parent felt that the children were not adequately prepared for their exams owing to the disruption caused by high levels of pupil and staff sickness. For example, English lessons were being taught by French teachers. The parent felt that removing certain things from exams to compensate for disruption was not a good approach. They stated that they felt that the children were being taught 'how to pass exams' and that this would not prepare them well for the next stage of their education. The parent was keen to stress that on an individual level, teachers were providing good support to pupils, but that there were structural issues. The parent was very concerned with poor communication surrounding exams. They stated that the SQA must consult with parents in a meaningful way.

### **After School Clubs**

Several parents talked about after school clubs at their schools, both primary and secondary. Some schools offered more after school clubs than others and some offered none.

One parent talked about an initiative in their local authority area called 'enrichment Fridays' where schools finish early on Friday. In place of classes, children can attend a number of different events such as sports clubs or work experience. This is not compulsory, however, and the parent noted that many of the older children did not participate.

One parent noted that their child's ASN school had yet to re-start after school clubs. They noted that many children travelled a considerable distance to attend the school, making after school clubs more difficult to organise. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the parent shared that PEF had been used in their child's school to deliver martial arts classes, including covering the cost of transport. PEF funding had also been used to employ a CLD (Community Learning and Development) worker which the parent felt had been very successful.

### **Pupil Equity Funding (PEF)**

There were mixed views on the use of PEF and parent/carer involvement in how it is used.

One parent said that their school had been very transparent about how PEF was to be spent and that the school continually consulted with the parent council. One parent said at their school, parents were not consulted about PEF funding. They noted that in the last few years PEF had been spent on additional staff. Parents were not meaningfully engaged with or consulted about PEF in their school. Some parents were not given any opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process, despite continually requesting this. At their school, some parents were unhappy about this but did not know how to change it and were fearful of damaging their relationship with the headteacher. One parent stressed the need for parents to be involved in the consultation process as they have a good insight into what their children need.

One parent shared seemingly small but important ways of supporting individual children at their school. For example, ensuring that a child had someone to take them to the school dance and ensuring that no child would be without a Halloween costume. In short, PEF was used to ensure that no child was left out. In their school, they felt that parents were part of the discussion on PEF and were provided with good information.

In contrast, one parent stated that they had never heard of PEF and that their school had no after school clubs. They were unaware of the level of support that other schools were receiving.

### **Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic**

The continuing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was evident throughout the discussion. One parent shared that they had never been able to meet their child's teacher in high school. Another parent had never been able to see inside of the school building. One parent whose child was attending an ASN school stated that the Head of Education for their local council met frequently with parents to ensure appropriate support, particularly when schools were closed. The parent felt that they were 'really listened to' and that the support they were given was excellent.



One parent said that there was a lot of 'lost learning' but the most significant aspect for their child, who had ASN, was the loss of the social aspect of school. Before the Covid-19 pandemic their school had initiatives such as a 'coffee bar' where pupils were able to operate a coffee shop within the school. For their child, the loss of this opportunity was devastating. The parent stressed that the loss of social skills and other life skills cannot be measured but they are the most important thing for the children attending their school.