

## **National Assembly for Wales**

### **Children and Young People Committee**

**EO 13**

#### **Inquiry into Educational Outcomes for Children from Low Income Households**

**Evidence from : Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC)**

The National Union of Teachers Wales (UCAC) welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Children and Young People Committee's inquiry into the educational outcomes of children from low-income households.

UCAC is a trade union representing 5,000 teachers, school leaders and lecturers in higher and further education across Wales.

- 1. The effectiveness of Welsh Government policy and strategy in mitigating the link between poverty and educational outcomes, including the *Tackling Poverty Action Plan*; relevant education policy; and broader Welsh Government policies in this regard, such as Communities First.**

Poverty is too great a problem in Wales for individual schools to be expected to mitigate the effect it has on outcomes.

Strategy and funding are required on a national level, and leadership on a county level, in order to start addressing the problem. It needs to be acknowledged that all schools can do is contribute to addressing the problem, and that outcomes are not the only measure of success when dealing with this issue. There are many aspects of poverty that extend beyond family income, and schools face the challenge of responding to the full range of effects and characteristics associated with poverty.

We wish to draw the Committee's attention to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, *Poverty and Low Educational Achievement in Wales: Student, Family and Community Interventions*, by David Egan (February

2013). One of the conclusions of the report is that the Welsh Government needs to introduce policies that focus on students, families and communities, as well as ones that concentrate mainly on learning and teaching, and this is especially true in the context of the Pupil Deprivation Grant.

**2. The respective roles of the Welsh Government, education regional consortia, local authorities, schools and governing bodies in addressing this issue and why there is variation between schools in mitigating the link between poverty and educational outcomes.**

It can be difficult for schools to provide support to specific groups of pupils whilst avoiding the risk of creating stigma, as has happened in some circumstances with the provision of free school meals.

The answer is to provide everyone with general support eg facilities to do homework, a mentoring service. This can mean that all of the pupils in the group make progress, which, in turn, has little effect on the gap in achievement between the two cohorts. In certain circumstances, such support can prove counter-productive as pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are not the ones who are most likely to make use of the provision, and, as a result, the gap increases.

UCAC is supportive of all efforts to share good practice; sufficient resources need to be secured in order to release staff to share their experiences and discuss issues. However, if a strategy has worked in one context, we must be careful not to presume that it will be just as successful in another.

**3. Whether Welsh Government policy sufficiently takes forward issues relating to parental engagement in respect of the educational outcomes of children from low-income households, and whether it addresses the views and experiences of children and young people from such households regarding the barriers in this regard.**

UCAC has expressed its concern about cutbacks to the Education Welfare Service in a previous consultation. These officers often provide a link with the families in question, offering a means of improving attendance and the engagement of pupils and parents with the school and its work.

We wish to draw the Committee's attention to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, *Poverty and Low Educational Achievement in Wales: Student, Family and Community Interventions*, by David Egan (February 2013). One of the conclusions of the report is that the Welsh Government needs to introduce policies that focus on students, families and communities, as well as ones that concentrate mainly on learning and teaching, and this is especially true in the context of the Pupil Deprivation Grant.

**4. Relevant funding issues, including the effectiveness of the pupil deprivation grant and any anticipated effects of the recently issued guidance for 2013–2015.**

Schools have faced substantial budget cuts in recent years, leading to larger class sizes. In reality, the grant can only begin to scratch the surface in terms of reversing the effects of such cuts on this specific group of pupils.

**5. The costs associated with education (trips, uniforms, sporting equipment etc) and the effectiveness of the Welsh Government's approach in ensuring that children from low-income households are not disadvantaged in this regard.**

Schools face a number of challenges if they are to provide such experiences for this particular group of pupils:

- identifying the group and setting criteria in terms of who should receive support
- finding the money to provide the service to the group – which often involves cutting expenditure in another area

- providing the service without creating stigma
- being accountable for this expenditure in the face of allegations that some families exploit such benefits

**6. Issues relevant to free school meals within this context, such as take-up rates, the perceived stigma of claiming free school meals, the use of free school meals as a proxy indicator for child poverty and the impact of the need to revise eligibility criteria arising from the introduction of Universal Credit.**

Free school meals statistics do not provide an indicator reliable enough on which to base so many public statements eg banding. Head teachers will often be able to cite pupils from eligible families who do not take up free school meals because of the perceived stigma or preconceptions surrounding the content and quality of school meals. In some rural areas, a high percentage of families narrowly miss out on being able to claim free school meals because both parents are in employment and, as a result, the school finds itself in a 'family' of schools in relatively prosperous areas.

UCAC

National Union of Teachers Wales