Raising the Educational Attainment of Looked After Children

Thursday 15th December 2005

This seminar aimed to take a fresh look at policy and practice on how to turn around the persistently low educational attainment levels of looked after children. The seminar was hosted by the ippr and Rainer, in response to the social injustice that the low attainment of looked after children represents, and in view of the Department for Education and Skills’ planned consultation on the issue in early 2006.

Bringing together a range of relevant professionals and stakeholders, the seminar dealt with several urgent questions:

- How could we ensure all looked after children have a boosted education package?
- What would the constituent parts of the package be and who would be eligible for it?
- How can we bring about the elusive cultural change within local authorities so that the role of the corporate parent is realised in practice?
- And what new policies could yield positive results given adequate resources?

The seminar began with three presentations from Hilton Dawson, Dave Hill and Natalie Acton and was followed by a roundtable discussion. This note provides a very brief summary of what was a broad and wide ranging discussion.

Hilton Dawson, Chief Executive, Shaftesbury Homes and Arethusa

1. Hilton started the seminar with a reminder of the injustice of the waste of talents experienced by so many looked after children. Despite their abilities and aspirations, many young people in the care of local authorities are failed educationally, restricting significantly their life chances.

2. The recent education White Paper was described as a positive opportunity for improved action on raising the educational attainment of looked after children. For Hilton, personalised learning, extended schools and admissions banding, in particular, have potential to raise the educational attainment of looked after children. Admissions and access to education for looked after children were the first problems facing looked after children; a system of banded admissions could be a response. Hilton argued that personalised learning and extended schools were an opportunity to develop an education system that meets, and is built around, individual needs, including the complex needs of looked after children.

3. Hilton called for clarity over the right of children to a decent education and the duty of local authorities to guarantee that right. Hilton ended by arguing that it was not beyond the abilities of authorities to improve the outcomes for the 60,000 children who are looked after in their care.

Dave Hill, Director of Children’s Services, London Borough of Merton (recently in post having joined from Tower Hamlets)
4. Dave drew on his experience in Merton and previously at Tower Hamlets to propose aspects of best practice that can raise the attainment of looked after children. The local authority of Merton has the highest proportion of looked after children gaining 5 or more GCSEs A*-C in the country. In fact, last year the results for looked after children were higher that those for the general population.

5. Dave identified several principles for local authorities, including:
   - Involving young people, he argued, must be central to any strategy, not an optional extra. The perspectives of young people were often challenging but brought new ideas necessary to developing a service that meets their needs.
   - A clear strategy and ethos, shared by all professionals and the young people they work for are also important.
   - A focus on performance and its indicators are important to ensure authorities aim high and deliver better services for young people in care.

6. Dave identified how higher educational attainment could be practically achieved:
   - Personal Education Plans (PEPs) should be a dynamic vehicle that identifies a child's needs as well as their targets and looks at how the plan can be put into action.
   - Involve foster carers in the education of children in their care.
   - Individual coaching and one-to-one interaction and encouragement are simple but vital measures.
   - Celebrate and reward success.
   - Young people must feel it is never too late to continue or return to education at a later stage.

Natalie Acton, Head of Commissioning, Strategy and Performance in Children's Services, London Borough of Lewisham

7. Natalie argued there is too little substance beneath current policy and practice around looked after children. For example:
   - The concept of ‘corporate parents’ is vague - by making everyone responsible, no one person held responsibility for the child in care and their education.
   - The PEP process is mechanistic and the role of the designated teacher had been limited by low expectations.
   - The absence of a clear blueprint for standards and national entitlements to provision limited the effectiveness of current policy strategy to raise the educational attainment of looked after children.

8. Some key issues underlying the under-attainment of looked after children were highlighted, including factors to do with the child, the school and the care placement. Child factors include: the prevalence of statements of special educational needs amongst looked after children, pre-care experiences and emotional distraction. Responses may include: improved preventative work in the early years and in the home pre-care, improved access to child and adolescent mental health services and a tailored educational support package which may include tutoring.

9. School level factors include: high absence rates resulting from truanting; difficulties in getting on a school roll and exclusions; being in the poorest schools; and not being registered for GCSEs. Responses may include: a ‘welfare call’, a ‘zero-tolerance’ of the exclusion of looked after children, clarifying responsibility for registering children for GCSEs, and greater incentives - and pressure - on schools to admit looked after children. For example, the top performing schools could be required to take a certain proportion of looked after children. Local authorities could be required to publish data showing how many of the looked after children in their Borough (both their own and those placed with them from other authorities) were enrolled in the 10% best performing schools.

10. Care level factors include: placement break down and mobility negatively impacting on educational stability, education not being given sufficient priority in the home, unclear responsibilities where children
are placed out of borough, lack of a consistent adult, and poor access to extra-curricular activities. Responses may include: growing the placement market, raising the bar for foster carers, imposing responsibilities on host authorities, a radical mentoring scheme (possibly involving tuition fee waivers for recent graduates) and a budget for extra-curricular and other activities which will build resilience.

11. There is a need to look at the group who are not yet in care, but in need and at risk of going into care. For example, offering an intensive support package pre-care to adolescents at risk of entering care.

Discussion

12. The roundtable discussion looked within and beyond education for ways to improve the educational attainment of looked after children, bearing in mind that educational inputs are not the only means necessary to achieve improved educational outcomes. For example, it was noted that care needs had to be addressed in order for educational interventions to be effective. Debate centred on the issue of entitlement. How could we both respond to individual children's differing needs and secure a national standard to tackle inequalities in provision and support for looked after children between local authorities so that all match up to the performance of the best?

Implementation issues and raising standards across the board

13. It was noted that despite increased spending over the last six years have we seen few improvements in outcomes for young people in public care. It was suggested that there were difficulties in implementation of policy. Whilst the DfES can put structures in place, the process – the actual skills and key relationships between individuals - is what makes the difference to the education of looked after children.

14. It was argued that a designated worker with responsibility for the young person was key. It was suggested that this person may be drawn from any number of professionals with whom the young person has contact. For example, one person argued that any local authority employee – regardless of which department they work in - should be assigned a looked after child whose needs they should champion as part of their role.

15. It was recommended that no additional people or professionals were brought into the life of the young person, who already has contact with multiple professionals. General improvements in social care, in particular better qualified and permanent social workers, was seen as a necessary part of raising the educational attainment of looked after children.

16. It was noted that DfES field teams sometimes lacked the skills to facilitate improvements. There are also questions about whether or not the system of accountability is sufficiently robust. Performance indicators for schools tend to provide strong incentives but do have perverse effects too. For example, they can lead to a focussing of resources on the strongest exam candidates.

17. The experience of Merton was elaborated. Reducing the numbers in care, by preventing children entering care and getting them out of the system as quickly as possible, meant that there was more educational support for those who were in care. Real partnership between education and social care, and an ethos of passion for looked after children's education, was also important in Merton's experience.

Individual budgets

18. The need for a budget, attached to a personalised package of education, was put forward as a way to overcome the variability in provision. It was argued that a budget which followed the child could play a role in tackling the problems of admissions. Extra resources which followed the looked after young people could incentivise their admission into a school. Having finances attached to - and possibly under the control of - the child was recommended as a useful way of ensuring the child was really put at the
centre of services and had a say in a way that wasn't tokenistic. It was also thought that such a budget could teach young people financial skills which they could transfer to other aspects of their lives.

19. It was felt that the requirements on schools to admit and support looked after children still need to be strengthened.

20. An example was cited from Scotland where young people are given a lump sum to spend on education-related activity. There was some support for the idea of young people gaining a voice and greater autonomy through this kind of spending power. Young people’s motivation to achieve and aspirations were not identified as a significant barrier to attainment.

**Target group**
21. Whilst the gap in educational attainment between looked after children and their peers widens at each stage of education, differences at key stage one are highly significant to later educational attainment and future life chances. This makes it important to intervene early. It was also felt to be important that more work was done with teenagers on the brink of going into care. For example, by developing a care package with education for them but in their home. The more widely we can define the group of ‘looked after children’, the more effective any policy on the issue will be.

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