

Children and Young People Select Committee  
Scrutiny Review Narrowing the Gap in Educational Attainment

## **CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SELECT COMMITTEE**

### **SCRUTINY REVIEW OF NARROWING THE GAP IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT**

#### 1.0 Executive Summary

1.1 This report presents the outcomes of an appreciative inquiry (AI) into narrowing the gap in educational attainment.

1.2 The educational achievement gap has a huge impact on aspirations and opportunities and can feed into a cycle of other socioeconomic trends. Educational achievement, and its relationship with socioeconomic background, is one of the enduring issues in educational research. This makes it vital that we work together in a coherent and purposeful way to find out what approaches and strategies can be used to make a difference to the achievement of groups, such as disadvantaged pupils, children on the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) register or Children in Our Care (CIOC).

1.3 Based on the top challenges identified by Stockton-on-Tees Primary and Secondary Schools, the Select Committee decided to focus their work on two key factors impacting on educational attainment:

- Attendance
- Communication (vocabulary, oracy and literacy)

1.4 The work focused on exploring the following key questions within these strands:

#### **Attendance**

1. What are the barriers to attendance/reasons for absence?
2. How can absence be eliminated?
3. How can school provide a welcome and supportive school environment for pupils and their families?
4. How can relationships between pupils, teachers and parents be strengthened?

#### **Communication**

1. What are the reasons for low levels of communication/ language development?
2. What are the impacts of low levels of communication/ language development for our students?
3. How can low levels of communication/ language development (oracy, vocabulary) be eliminated?
  - In early years
  - In primary
  - In secondary
4. How can relationships with parent/carers, teachers, business and industry be strengthened?

1.5 The overall aim of the project was to work collaboratively with schools and partners to explore what good practice already exists and what could still be done to support of families, establish innovative ways of working and make better use of resources through a renewed approach.

1.6 This Appreciative Inquiry has accessed a range of stakeholders across Stockton in order to capture the varying needs of the different communities. Engagement has sought to bring stakeholders together to design:

- A shared vision for closing the gap
- An action plan informed by evidenced-based research to secure impact
- Interventions tailored to the current specific needs of Stockton schools and pupils most affected by the attainment gap.
- To secure multi-agency commitment to implement the action plan
- To secure multi-agency accountability for action taken and impact

1.7 Engagement has included:

- Pupil and Parent Voice Interviews – February 2024 (120 pupils; 40 parent/carers)
- Stakeholder Event on 8 March 2024 Attendance (50 attendees)
- Stakeholder Event on 22 March 2024 Communication (47 attendees)
- Stakeholder Workshop 15 May 2024 – Health (10 attendees)
- Digital survey (78 primary; 24 secondary; 146 parent/carer)
- Parent Carer Forum Surveys (feedback was sought from the 1800 members)

1.8 Stakeholders involved in this Appreciative Inquiry included senior leaders from a wide range of schools, services and agencies:

- Primary Schools
- Secondary Schools
- Further Education Colleges
- Pupil Referral Units
- Parent Carer Forum
- Local Authority representatives from: Safeguarding; Education; Inclusion; Health Education and Wellbeing; Early Support; Early Help; SEND; Mental Health Support; Careers; Virtual School; Attendance; Community Engagement; Legal; Culture and Libraries
- Public Health
- Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector (VCSE): local and regional

### **Headline Feedback – Stakeholder Engagement**

- Importance of communication and positive relationships
- Need to understand pressures on families
- Importance of partnership and community support
- Need to listen to the child's and parent's voice
- The importance of teaching and support tailored to the needs of the individual child
- Need to provide opportunities for social interaction and the development of speaking and listening skills
- Promote the importance of reading
- Design a curriculum meaningful for all children
- Celebrate achievement

### **Headline Feedback – Pupil Voice**

- Importance of positive relationships
- Importance of calm environments
- Impact of caring responsibilities
- Impact of technology
- Need to manage own feelings
- Value of celebration and reward
- Value of after school clubs

### **Headline Feedback – Parent Carer Voice**

- Importance of positive relationships
- Importance of calm environments
- Value of good transitions
- Importance of strong communication
- Impact on mental health
- Impact on behaviour
- Ambition and aspiration
- Value of multi-agency support

## Conclusion

1.8 Significant efforts are being made to narrow the gap in educational attainment across schools and services within the local authority and wider services across the region, including the voluntary and charity sector. Our findings have established that sometimes these approaches are not coherently focused and may not fully meet the individual needs of our children and their families. This appreciative inquiry, through the voices of our children and their families, has been instrumental in helping to fine-tune these strategies and securing buy-in from a wide range of stakeholders to implement the actions identified. Ongoing future monitoring, analysis and evaluation will establish if these refreshed approaches strengthen the impact made.

## Recommendations

That Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council works collaboratively with partners and key stakeholders to deliver the following shared objectives:

### 1. Improve attendance

Support schools to improve attendance:

- Encourage school leaders' use of the Attendance Self Evaluation Toolkit to identify what is working well, and areas which could be developed
- Promote an inclusive and relevant curriculum - where a young person wants to attend
- Work with the Team Around the School Service.
- Ensure that schools are equipped to deal with health issues.
- Identify individual barriers to attendance to better target support and intervention with specific reference to young carers

### 2. Forge positive relationships

Ensure that school culture proactively forges positive relationships between pupils, staff and parent/ carers:

- Promote respectful behaviours from all partners including teachers.
- Involve parents in school life.
- Extend opportunities for enhanced transition.

### 3. Improve communication

Design, deliver and support parent/carer communication strategies:

- Use new technologies and apps.
- Implement communication strategies early ensuring that good communication is embedded across the school community.
- Consider single points of contact and how best to communicate (not relying on technology alone).
- Offer parent/ carer engagement training for all staff.

### 4. Identify and support young carers

- Raise awareness of young carer identification and support for pupils.
- Extend the range of opportunities for young carers to link with others socially.

### 5. Managing emotions

Strengthen environment and opportunities for pupils to manage emotions:

- Engage with the Healthy Schools Programme and Healthy Settings Programme
- Design and delivery of courses to meet pupil need and support parents, with specific reference to:

- managing behaviour effectively.
- supporting mental health and wellbeing – especially to de-escalate heightened behaviour or to reduce stress levels.
- positive parenting skills.
- Strengthen the use of pupil voice to support development of school environments which better support them to manage their emotions.

## **6. Refine teaching strategies**

Further refine teaching strategies to improve lesson enjoyment, encourage speaking and listening and strengthen understanding also ensuring that teaching is tailored to the needs of the individual child.

## **7. Developing speaking and listening skills**

- Ensure the curriculum and school clubs provide opportunities to develop speaking and listening skills, for example through debating clubs.
- Raise awareness of regional and national opportunities to develop speaking and listening skills

## **8. Extend enrichment offer**

Strengthen and extend curriculum enrichment offer which better matches pupils needs and interests:

- Extend enrichment to include kick-boxing; boxing; coding; cooking clubs; sports clubs and story.
- Extend and promote the Tees Active Offer to include First Aid, paddle boards (team building) and extend offer within school holidays.
- Engage with the Healthy Schools Programme and Healthy Settings Programme

## **9. Celebrate achievement**

Extend the range of opportunities to celebrate achievement including recognition for out of school activities and engagement with local, regional and national awards and competitions.

## **10. Enhance curriculum development**

Work with partners and labour markets, making more explicit links to future employment.

- Innovate a local curriculum.

## **11. Strengthen understanding of career pathways**

Clarify pathways to careers early in school life:

- Design and delivery of courses to clarify current career pathways for pupils and parents, including vocational careers and options other than traditional routes.
- Employment & Training Hub to link with schools to notify parents of apprenticeships events.
- Promote aspirational/motivational approaches.
- Strengthen links between schools/parents/careers advisor.
- Share best practice regarding "careers" evenings/ events in primary and secondary schools.
- Invite parents into school who have unusual careers.
- Educate parents on opportunities post 16.

## **12. Strengthen transition arrangements**

Ensure that transition arrangements better fits bespoke pupil needs, with specific reference to vulnerable pupils:

- Ensure plans are put in place well in advance of any transition.
- Consider transition to post-16 and post-18/19 as well as primary and secondary and school readiness.
- Consider transition between year groups as appropriate.

### **13. Enhance skills to respond to special needs**

Increase range of opportunities to enhance skills in mainstream schools to respond to Special Educational Needs (SEN), Child Protection Plans (CPP) and Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA):

- Share best practice of integrating SEN pupils into mainstream schools.
- Promote vocational opportunities.

### **14. Review behaviour policies**

Review behaviour policies to ensure that they are appropriate and proportionate and that inclusion policies align with behaviour policies:

- What happens when a young person is removed from the classroom. Where do they go? What teaching takes place?

### **15. Embed and extend pastoral support**

Embed and extend pastoral support in schools targeted to need.

- Engage with the Healthy Schools Programme and Healthy Settings Programme.

### **16. Strengthen support for parent/carers to develop language and reading skills**

Design and deliver courses and activities to develop reading and language skills.

- Promote Functional English Courses.
- Invite parents/ carers to support reading groups at primary school.
- Promote reading through free Enrichment/after school clubs.
- Ensure parents understand the importance of reading.
- Use school social media to help parents/carers learn
- Ensure materials are easy read/jargon free to involve parent/carers.
- Key messages being shared from antenatal contact.
- Work with Read Easy Charity - helping people learn to read.

### **17. Review cost of living responses to diminish impact**

Review Cost of Living responses to diminish its impact, with specific reference to period poverty, food poverty and school uniform:

- Work with Child Poverty Network.
- Work with schools to better promote/communicate Cost of Living interventions.
- Encourage all schools to 'Poverty Proof the School Day'.