



Better Odds at School Campaign

Targeted investment to help close the educational attainment gap

It is unacceptable that at every stage of schooling Wales' poorest children do worse and make less progress than their better-off classmates. The stark educational achievement gaps reinforce and perpetuate existing patterns of poverty. To break cycles of deprivation, children from the poorest homes must be given high-quality and sustained additional support to ensure they can overcome disadvantage and realise their potential. This will require additional school spending targeted at children living in poverty.

Save the Children is calling on the Welsh Assembly Government and the main political parties in Wales to commit to:

- Ensuring National and Local Authorities' child poverty strategies include targets and resources to improve the educational opportunities and learning experiences of the poorest children.
- Targeting additional funding for the poorest pupils in Wales
- Investment in evidence based parenting programmes and activities for children in the most deprived areas
- The Welsh Assembly Government to support local services to work better together to ensure that out of school activities are accessible to all children and young people

An unacceptable achievement gap

There is little disagreement about the scale or persistence of under-achievement by the poorest children within the education system.

Children growing up in poverty are less likely to do well at school. Low income in a family is a strong predictor of poor educational achievement¹. At every stage of schooling children living in poverty do worse and make less progress than their better off classmates. The persistence in the achievement gap is of great concern. There has been no improvement in addressing the achievement gap in recent years:

- **Inequalities in educational outcomes become apparent from the early years.** Children living in poverty arrive at school with significant disadvantages. By the age of 6, initially low achieving children from more advantaged homes will tend to outperform initially high achieving children from less advantaged homes².
- **Inequalities associated with poverty and area deprivation widen by the time a child leaves primary school.** Evidence has shown that the impact of poverty on attainment levels is more extreme by the age of ten³.
- **By the time the most disadvantaged young people leave school, there is a considerable gap in attainment.** Figures show that across Wales there still remains a 34% 'GCSE' attainment gap between children entitled to free school meals and those who are not.

Child poverty

Addressing the achievement gap is vital to enable individual children to succeed at school and reach their potential. It should also be seen in the broader context of eradicating child poverty. 32% of the child population is living in poverty in Wales.⁴ This is an unacceptably high level of poverty. We have a national commitment from the Welsh Assembly Government to eradicate child poverty by 2020 and reduce socio-economic disadvantage.

The Welsh Government has produced a strategy setting out the actions that it will take to meet the

target. The role of education and eradicating the achievement gap is central to this goal. In an independent report setting out what is needed to end child poverty, it was noted that 'only by reversing the historic trend in the poorest achieving least at school can the government deliver the kind of impact needed to tackle child poverty and the intergenerational cycle of poverty'.⁵

However in Wales, a series of landmark studies and reviews sponsored by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the National Assembly for Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government and the Welsh Local Government Association (CPEG, 2008; NAFW, 2008, 2002; Egan, 2007), have all concluded that whilst schools have a central role in helping close the gap, they cannot do it alone. In line with this, Welsh Assembly Government policy, has promoted partnership working between a range of different actors through a range of policy 'levers' including:

- **The promotion** of children and young people centred approaches, with a focus on rights, entitlements & outcomes (WAG, 2004);
- **An emphasis** in the School Effectiveness Framework for Wales (SEF) upon tri-level reform and systems thinking and for schools to work with others in order to improve educational outcomes, enhance well-being and tackle poverty (WAG, 2008);
- **The introduction** of new duties to cooperate, new structures & plans, such as children and young people partnerships (CYPP) (WAG, 2007);
- **Enabling & encouraging** joint working, by providing advice and support through bodies such as the Partnership Support Unit, the introduction of new legislation and guidance, the introduction of grants, such as Cymorth, and through changes in the inspection regime, such as the introduction of area based inspections.

Addressing the gap

The Welsh education system caters well for the majority of students. But the fact that there is still a significant gap in the achievement gap demands decisive additional policy measures.

Although the main focus of this briefing is on addressing some of the school factors that prevent the poorest children from achieving, evidence shows that to address this problem there is a need to focus on both the school *and* non school factors. The home learning environment, particularly the ability of parents to engage in their children's learning has been shown to make a significant difference in helping children to reach their educational potential.⁶ A specific focus on the early years, to address problems early and prevent poorer educational outcomes is also a key part of the Welsh Assembly Government strategy. Therefore, we are not just calling for additional investment to schools, in isolation. It is part of a wider approach. We are calling for a national commitment to raising the educational achievement of children living in poverty. There are three key elements to the approach:

- Invest in extra resources for schools to support children in poverty to succeed at school, throughout their school life.
- Invest in high quality early education and care, particularly in disadvantaged areas
- Invest in evidence based parenting support programmes that support parents to engage in their children's learning.

The need for targeted extra resources

Evidence suggests that to realise their potential the poorest children need higher levels of school funding to provide extra support. It is essential to address specific issues of poverty and a more targeted and focused approach to funding should be taken, especially for schools in areas of deprivation. A study by the Institute of Fiscal Studies on 'Pupil Premiums' concluded that increasing resources (spent on initiatives proven to work) is likely to have a direct impact on pupils' attainment. As the extra resources will be targeted at schools with disadvantaged pupils,

they seem likely to decrease the attainment gap between rich and poor pupils.⁷

Additional Funding

Save the Children is calling for additional funding to be introduced in Wales that includes the following essential elements:

Additional spend from outside the schools budget. This is *additional* to money already factored into school funding. It must be absolutely clear to schools that this money is earmarked for raising the attainment of the poorest pupils.

Focus on improving educational outcomes for the poorest pupils. The criteria for determining how additional money would be allocated should be as broad as possible to reach all children living in poverty. Save the Children believes that the most useful indicator of poverty amongst individual pupils at present is entitlement to free school meals.

Spend on support that is proven to make a difference. Decisions on how to use the money within schools should be at the discretion of head teachers based on guidance that sets out what works in improving achievement of disadvantaged children. A comprehensive guide on the best proven ways of raising the achievement of the poorest pupils must be available for all schools to help with internal planning. There is already a good body of evidence of the types of approaches that provide the most effective approaches to improve attainment.⁸ Examples include:

- One to one support or catch up tuition
- Targeted extra curricular activities or after school/ holiday study programmes
- Learning mentors
- Extra teachers
- Engaging parents in children's learning
- Family interventions such as nurture groups

At a sufficient level to make a difference. The level of funding should be set at an amount that would enable schools to introduce the necessary package of additional support for the poorest pupils that will make a difference to their education.

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Include strong monitoring and accountability mechanisms. Schools should be required to monitor and report on the impact the dedicated funding has made on the achievement of the poorest pupils in their school. School, Local Authority and Welsh level data should be available on the progress made by the poorest pupils. Estyn should assess schools on the allocation, monitoring and impact of the funding. This model would help drive a move from 'input' to 'outcome' measurement of education funding and achievement.

Recommendations

Save the Children believes that more resources for the poorest pupils is one part of the solution to closing the educational achievement gap between children living in poverty and more affluent children. We are calling for the main political parties in Wales to commit to:

- **Ensuring National and Local Authorities' child poverty strategies include targets and resources to improve the educational opportunities and learning experiences of the poorest children.**
- **Ensure the Welsh Assembly Government targets additional funding for the poorest pupils in Wales**
- **Ensure there is investment in evidence based parenting programmes and activities for children in the most deprived areas.**
- **The Welsh Assembly Government to support local services to work better together to ensure that out of school activities are accessible to all children and young people.**

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- ⁶ Cassen, R, *Tackling low educational achievement*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007.
- ⁷ Chowdry, Greaves, Sibieta (2010), *The Pupil Premium: Assessing the Options*, Institute of Fiscal Studies.
- ⁸ For example, Desforges, C & Abouchar A (2003), *The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family*, Department of Families, Education, and Schools and Harris A & Goodall J (2009), *Supporting families to impact on their children's education*, Save the Children.

Save the Children fights for vulnerable children in the UK and around the world who suffer from poverty, disease, injustice and violence. We work with them to find lifelong answers to the problems they face.

We work to ensure that the rights of children in the UK and around the world are protected, promoted and respected in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and other international human rights instruments, with a particular focus on poverty and educational attainment.

In the UK we work directly with children and families experiencing poverty and provide expertise, research and policy support to key partners including local authorities and national government. We are members of the End Child Poverty coalition and take a lead role in the campaign to end child poverty.

Support the Better Odds at School Campaign at savethechildren.org.uk/betterodds