

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

9 NOVEMBER 2010

Children's Scrutiny - Educational Attainment Working Group
Select Committee on Educational Attainment
29 June 2010, Oxfordshire County Council

Introduction

1. The Children's Scrutiny Educational Attainment working group concluded this year's work on primary educational attainment with a Select Committee on the 29th June 2010.
2. Prior to this the working group had visited 16 schools across the County and the information gathered pointed to three main areas of activity to be covered on the day. These were: Children's Centres, Improving the School Environment and Collaborative working.
3. Within these three main headings there were a number of subsidiary areas of interest and these are set out below:

4. Children's centres

- i. Improving intake for reception – including expanding outreach
- ii. Increasing the free child placements take-up by 3-5 year old children
- iii. Better links between Children's Centres and Schools

5. Improvements in the school environment

- i. Addressing behavioural issues
- ii. Improving teacher performance – including policies to remove under performing teachers.

6. Collaborative working

- i. Developing greater regional working relations across Oxfordshire partnerships
- ii. Supporting staff development through brokering a service to schools
- iii. Improving communication between OCC and schools

7. Evidence was taken from:

- Annie Davy – Strategic Lead for Early Learning and Childcare
- Amanda Powell – Interim Strategic Lead, Children's Centres, Childcare and Parenting Development
- Sally Taylor – Head of Northern Area and Raising Achievement,
- Andrew Butler – Strategic HR Business Partner, Shared Services
- Jean Creagh – Service Manager Schools' HR, Shared Services
- Sharon Fleming – Service Manager, Communication and Performance

The Working Group would wish to express their thanks to all of the above.

Background to the working group's conclusions

8. The Working Group considered carefully the information provided. It became clear that, while it cannot be denied that there are poorly performing schools and teachers in Oxfordshire, these are a relatively small proportion of the whole (8 schools out of 290 are deemed “inadequate” by Ofsted).
9. However there are a large number of “satisfactory” schools. This is the third level in Ofsted evaluation below “good” and “outstanding”. Therefore it was agreed that it would be more beneficial for the improvement of educational attainment if the Council was to concentrate on improving the many “satisfactory” schools.
10. It was considered that, by focussing upon lifting and improving the many “satisfactory” schools to the levels of “good” and/or “outstanding”, overall educational attainment in primary schools would be improved. Furthermore the quality of teachers’ work would also benefit.
11. It is recommended that this improvement should be pursued through three strands:
 - i. Best practise sharing and collaborative working
 - ii. Staff development of “Satisfactory teachers” to “Outstanding teachers”
 - iii. Governors playing a key role in driving improvements in “Satisfactory” schools
12. The outcomes and **recommendations** from the Select Committee’s discussions are outlined below in the following synopsis of the information gathered. **It is proposed that agreed recommendations should be sent to the Cabinet Member for School Improvement and the Director of Children, Young People and Families for implementation. A review should take place in November 2011 to evaluate progress on improvement.**

MOVING BEYOND “SATISFACTORY”

Best practise sharing and collaborative working

13. Improving educational attainment has to be a co-operative effort. Better links between Oxfordshire County Council, Children’s Centres, schools and parents are essential if educational attainment is to continue to be improved.
14. Federations and other partnership solutions facilitate the transfer of excellence and enable the extension of the reach of the best leaders, governors and schools. The working group is of the opinion that there should be a speeding up of the development of federations and in particular those where excellent schools could clearly be in a position to extend knowledge to other schools not performing at the same level.
15. However it is recognised that face to face contact is not always necessary and the use of technology is a very efficient way of disseminating best practice.

16. Members of the working group were pleased to recognise the development of Children's Centres across the County. Children's Centres are for children under five and their families, and offer a variety of services that families may need to make the most of life's opportunities, whatever their background or circumstances. The centres act as a central point where families with children under 5 years old can find a wide variety of activities, play, information and support from professionals. These professionals team up to share information and work together to the benefit of Oxfordshire's children.
17. The centres are situated throughout the County and include activities such as:
- play times for children
 - advice, support and learning opportunities for parents & carers
 - health services such as antenatal classes
 - a place to meet people and make friends
18. Early learning and links to local schools and out of school activities help ease children into school and provide them with a good start to education that knocks on into the quality of outcomes for the schools. Staff in children's centres know the local area and are aware of the more vulnerable children. Such knowledge should enable them to liaise with local schools to raise their awareness of which children might need extra support.

The working group makes the following recommendations:

- I. Greater encouragement of the use of federations to enable their further and faster development. Members would wish to see evidence of such development in a review in twelve months time**
- II. New technology, in particular the Oxfordshire Learning Platform, should be further developed. This could also include:**
- III. Interactive conversations via modern media that are now used as part of everyday life such as Twitter, blogs, podcasts and an interactive helpline with a colleague supported Q&A feature**
- IV. A case study library for new ideas and inspiration**
- V. The new County Council Customer Service Centre should be used to avoid confusion when contacting the Council**
- VI. Children's centres are already beginning to have an impact on attainment and parents should be encouraged to use the Centres**
- VII. Links between Children's Centres and the local NHS should be improved further**
- VIII. Children's centres should be linked with other partners in a more creative way. For example, schools and children's centres should consider joint management arrangements. Closer links to the community and local schools should**

continue to be developed to for example include shared outdoors facilities.

- IX. Children's Centres should develop links to the community to make the most of local expertise, such as on housing, benefits etc.
- X. Children's Centre staff should actively participate in and support the transition to school of vulnerable children known to the local Centre
- XI. A timescale should be developed for the Children, Young People and Families directorate to analyse the impact of Children's Centre attendance on Key Stage 1 pupils

Staff development of "Satisfactory teachers" to "Outstanding teachers"

- 19. For schools to move beyond "Satisfactory" the quality of teaching is of paramount importance. Oxfordshire is blessed with many excellent teachers but, as with any organisation, there are also those who are less than excellent. Some will never be good enough and procedures exist that enable such teachers to be removed. While it is recognised that the process for the removal of under-performing teachers is difficult policies must be enacted to ensure that this happens.
- 20. However, probably more importantly, there is a need to develop those teachers who are operating at an average or "satisfactory" level to ensure that they are able to improve as individuals and thus contribute to the improvement of their school. In order for this to happen, teachers must be supported in developing 'outstanding' skills.

Therefore it is recommended that:

- I. A personal development scheme should be designed specifically to boost "Satisfactory" teachers
- II. Teachers who are considering becoming head teachers should be supported through an emerging leaders programme
- III. Very good and average teachers should be paired and work shadowing should be encouraged
- IV. Support for federation building should continue and include specific actions to address teacher development

Governors playing a key role in driving improvements in "Satisfactory" schools

- 21. Governors have a key responsibility to support the school in driving its performance forward. The information provided to governors by Oxfordshire County Council states that the main task for governing bodies is, "to promote high standards of educational achievement". They are expected to ask questions and contribute opinions and they should be aware that "satisfactory" is not good enough.
- 22. In order to do that governors must be provided with full information that enables them to have the ability to question headteachers and others.

They should also be made fully aware that support is available to them to support them in questioning.

23. Those governors in “satisfactory” schools should be given opportunities to visit excellent schools and speak to fellow governors from such schools in order to draw upon their experience. Without knowledge they will be unable to effectively question and help drive improvement.

It is therefore recommended that governors should:

- I. Be provided with the necessary information and support to enable them to challenge the perception that “Satisfactory” is good enough**
- II. Be made aware that the aim should be to have a dynamic school and that a “cosy” school atmosphere, while being nice, is not good enough**
- III. Be provided with the necessary technology to enable them to learn and share best practise**
- IV. Be provided with opportunities to visit excellent schools and speak to fellow governors**

1 November 2010