

COUNTY COUNCIL – 12 JANUARY 2010

THEMED DEBATE ON EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Report by Leader of the Labour Group

1. The purpose of this paper is to stimulate a debate on Educational Attainment in schools in Oxfordshire.
2. It is hoped the outcome will be ideas and proposals from Council which could be formulated by officers into recommendations to be considered by those who have responsibility for pupil attainment. These will include both those indirectly affecting it, such as the Police, Housing providers, the PCT, the Children's Trust, the new area structures, and the media and direct stakeholders such as governors, teachers, other staff in schools and headteachers.
3. Despite much analysis of the information related to under attainment in Oxfordshire, the Director of Public Health in his report said that "given our relative prosperity we should be performing better" and that "all organisations have some responsibility for remedying this situation". There are numerous reasons why children do not achieve and there is much research evidence about why this is likely to happen. I have listed these later in the paper and each of these will have some impact on the ultimate attainment of some children and therefore their life's chances.
4. We must make a difference to the achievement of all children and young people in Oxfordshire and so make it less likely that children will leave school without having attained the necessary skills to be co-operative, creative, challenging, contributing citizens ready to take their place in a global economy where there will be different technologies and different jobs to those we have known in the past.
5. The data we have on attainment in Oxfordshire have, I believe, led to all councillors in their role as Community Leaders and Governors to have a common purpose in this endeavour. We all know that Oxfordshire is not performing as well as it should and this is especially the case for particular groups such as those living in the most disadvantaged communities or from Black and Minority Ethnic Groups. Oxfordshire's attainment in 2009 at GCSE 5+ A*-C (including English and maths) showed an increase of 1.7%, lower than the rate for previous years, and well below our Statistical neighbours whose improvement was 3%. The data available are attached as an Annex to this paper and I have written the paper to help us consider how we together can contribute to ensuring all children and young people become the best they can be so that in a few years we can look at the data and see that we have made a difference in every school. A Scrutiny Review is taking place; their review is using the data as the starting point for analysis. This paper focuses on the child and our role, individually and collectively, in making a difference through all of the various structures which are now in place.

6. There is no better time to start this endeavour. We have a new Director of Children, Young People and Families; she comes with a fresh knowledge of “school improvement”, uninhibited by the baggage of traditional Directors of Education but having long experience of working with the most disadvantaged children and young people and a commitment to make their lives better. We too on this Council have a commitment and hope that we can raise educational attainment so perhaps at this point, in the words of Seamus Heaney, “ the longed for tidal wave of justice can rise up when hope and history rhyme”.
7. Let us now look at the factors which if tackled will lead to more young people achieving all that they can and attaining the goals we hope for Oxfordshire’s Schools.
8. Factors relating to under attainment amongst pupils include:-:
 - Low Birth weight
 - Poverty
 - Inability to form attachments
 - Low self esteem
 - Mental Health issues
 - Physical and emotional needs
 - Being born during the summer
 - Peer group pressure
 - Mother’s level of educational attainment
 - Quality of teaching
 - Impact of the whole school
 - Housing
9. Some factors such as Poverty have a direct impact whilst others such as Housing and Low Birth weight are an impact of Poverty. Working together we should be able to ensure that those without direct responsibility for education understand the impact which their policies can have on the educational outcomes for children living in poverty. Many children with these risk factors in their lives will be known to other agencies. We must therefore find ways of ensuring that these agencies see these children as a whole with all their dreams and aspirations still to be realised rather than a child in a family which is being re-housed or the child of a chaotic drug user. Many children are so crushed by the daily grind of life which leaves them angry and confused with low self esteem that they without multi agency working and without adults around them who are committed to raising their self esteem and resilience will not become motivated and inspired. On giving evidence to an American Commission on Teaching a teacher said: “ I was supposed to be a welfare statistic....it is because of a teacher I sit here. I remember her telling us one cold miserable day that she could not make our clothing better, she could not provide us with food she could not change the segregated conditions under which we lived but she could introduce us to the world of reading, the world of books and that she did and what a world.... I knew then what I wanted to be I wanted to do the same things I wanted to weave magic...” In Oxfordshire we

have many teachers who weave that magic. You hear it from young people who with enthusiasm tell you that they are going to be a teacher when they grow up. We need to ensure we have a system in place which acknowledges good teachers and spreads their magic across the system. We need to ensure that no child leaves school without having had a meaningful relationship with at least one adult, it doesn't need to be a teacher. Too many children leave school without having made any meaningful relationship with any adult even though all of the evidence shows the value of such relationships.

10. It is said that it takes a whole village to raise a child. We need to be better at making this happen and particularly we need to ensure there are projects and system in place in our most disadvantaged areas so that we can raise expectation and enable families and community groups to be involved. Through all of our partnership structures we should be encouraging community groups, employers, faith groups, etc to maximise their potential in supporting educational attainment. We cannot just leave it to the schools and their governing bodies.
11. Research shows that National and Regional Factors have less impact than local school based factors. As a county council therefore, we need to engage better with Governors and Communities in raising attainment and in particular we need to ensure Governors are able to monitor progress within their schools so that they can provide challenge to the Head and Leadership Team. Much work has been done nationally on the role of the School Governor in school improvement. The research shows that there are depressingly too many Governing Bodies where the Head is unchallenged and the Governors simply nod things through, ensuring the boxes are ticked before cosily congratulating each other that things are as good as they can be given the circumstances rather than striving for ever higher standards as each age group succeeds another. Perhaps we need to get governing bodies to work together to share good practice.
12. Primary schools often blame pre-school experiences and home background while secondary schools too often point to the pupils' experience at primary school to account for low attainment. In short it is always somebody else's fault. Clearly better working across partnerships and across phases and accepting some responsibility for children who may not as yet be on your roll could have a dramatic effect on the system. Many of our schools do get excellent results but too many of the children and young people do not reach their full potential. Of course there will always be unequal pupil outcomes but no school can really claim to be excellent for so long as those children from their poorest backgrounds are failing to reach the average standards of attainment achieved by children from more affluent backgrounds. There is much research on Educational Attainment and School Improvement most of which has been pointing in the same direction for decades. Now we know how to apply it at school level. Governors and those who support them from the Local Authority need to ensure that the research is being used and that where necessary training is provided so that Governors understand their role in relation to School Improvement.

13. How can we create a culture where everyone believes they can make a difference and have a common view about the difference that is needed?
14. In this paper I have tried to raise some of the issues about achievement and attainment, I hope I have not apportioned blame because it is this opt out which stands in the way of really making a difference to the life chances of the most disadvantaged young people.
15. Council is recommended to note the paper and to suggest ways in which greater involvement by all stakeholders can be encouraged and supported.

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Leader of the Labour Group

December 2009