

**ASSESSING THE GCSE ATTAINMENT LEVELS OF MATERIALLY
DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS: REPORT OF THE MEMBER LED REVIEW GROUP**

To: Children and Young People Overview & Scrutiny
Committee

Date: 06 February 2013

From: Democratic Services Manager

Electoral division(s): All

Forward Plan ref: N/a **Key decision:** No

Purpose: To inform the Committee on the outcome of the final meeting of the Member Led Review Group on General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) Attainment Levels of Materially Disadvantaged Students and seek agreement to the recommended next steps.

Decision required: Members are asked to agree that:

- the findings of the Member Led Review Group be widely distributed with schools in Cambridgeshire, Head Teachers and governing bodies using established forums.
- the Member Led Review Group is re-convened in January 2014 to monitor the impact of their findings.

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1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 A report to the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee in February 2012 provided details of a relative decline in Cambridgeshire's performance at GCSE level in 2011.
- 1.2 In this context it was agreed that a Member Led Review would take a cross-cutting and thematic review of this issue, focused on this specific aspect of relative weakness, i.e. the attainment of materially disadvantaged pupils.
- 1.3 It was agreed that the Review should focus on determining why attainment levels are relatively poor and identify areas of good practice that can be built upon in order to reverse the decline.
- 1.4 The findings of the Review Group were presented to the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee in December 2012. These findings are reproduced in Appendix One below.
- 1.5 It was agreed by the Committee in December the Member Led Review Group has one final meeting with senior officers from Children and Young People's Services to discuss their findings and identify how they can inform the proposed work identified in Section 5 above.
- 1.6 It was also agreed that the results of this discussion be presented to the Committee in conjunction with the Report on Educational Attainment for 2012 in February 2013. This report is also on today's agenda.

2. NEXT STEPS

- 2.1 The Member Led Review Group met once more on 15th January 2013 with Guy Dickens, Head of Service with CYPs.
- 2.2 The Review Group focused its discussions on how to publicise and utilise its findings to best effect. It was explained to the Review Group how the County Council continues to work with, and offer support to, academies within the County despite the fact that they are now independent bodies. Examples included Keeping In Touch Visits; Governor Briefings and the Secondary Heads Forum.
- 2.3 The Review Group expressed concern that at both national and local level the emphasis has been on monitoring performance rather than acting to improve it. The Group felt that while their findings were not necessarily new or innovative they did provide a very useful, and locally based, synopsis of potential approaches to improving performance by materially disadvantaged students. As such the Group was keen to encourage schools across the County to consider them.
- 2.4 On this basis the Group agreed to seek approval from the Committee that:
 - The findings should be shared with schools using:
 - the **Cambridgeshire Secondary Heads** forum which meets termly with an annual conference.
 - **Keeping In Touch Visits**, which are annual meetings between senior County Council officers from the Learning and Enhanced + Preventative Directorates with head teachers.
 - **Governor briefings** - run by the County Council for school governors on a termly basis in 3 areas of the County.

- The Member Led Review Group will reconvene in January 2014 and will seek interviews with a number of head teachers and will use a questionnaire format to determine the extent to which the findings have influenced approaches within schools and whether it is having an impact on narrowing the gap between the GCSE attainment levels of materially disadvantaged students and those of their peers.

2.5 **NB: Since the final meeting of the Member Led Review Group the findings have already been shared with the Cambridgeshire Secondary Heads Executive which has agreed to consider the findings and to feedback its response via Guy Dickens.**

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Committee agree that:

- **The findings should be shared with schools through the bodies identified in 2.4 above;**
- **The Member Led Review Group reconvenes in January 2014 to monitor the impact of its findings.**

FINDINGS OF THE MEMBER LED REVIEW GROUP ON GCSE ATTAINMENT LEVELS OF MATERIALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

- 1.1 Members of the Review Group have visited four schools which appeared to have better results for FSM pupils than the generality of Cambridgeshire schools, but we note that there are year-on-year variances even in these schools and in the case of many Cambridgeshire Schools, the number of FSM pupils in any one cohort is too small to be statistically significant. We found all four visits to be of interest and appreciate the time taken by senior staff to answer our questions.
- 1.2 The Member-Led Review group notes that the greatest influence on a young person's performance lies in factors outside the school - health, poverty, domestic circumstances, parental education level, parental commitment to education. International research suggests that only 30% of a pupil's outcomes can be attributed to school-based activity. This depressingly low figure does not, however, absolve schools from the need to address the issues of low-performing and FSM pupils (not always the same individual) in a rigorous and determined way. Early identification of potential problems is essential. Remedial action later on in a child's career is costly and less effective.
- 1.3 A number of features strike us as possibly making a positive contribution to effective work with FSM pupils. These are listed below, but not in order of importance since they are all important.
 - 1.3.1 **Good pastoral care** is essential, with a strong and positive relationship between pupils and tutor, preferably with continuity, a relationship that is both supportive and yet challenging in terms of personal academic and behavioural aspirations. A can-do approach. Where provision can include a 'behaviour unit' to give short-term support and prevent a pupil getting on to the exclusion treadmill, that is seen as beneficial. There may be merit in a vertical grouping tutor group system where older pupils can mentor and support younger ones. The role of the tutor in providing encouragement, challenge and support should not be under-estimated.
 - 1.3.2 **Involvement of parents** is a powerful factor. Through e-mails the schools are able to give parents quick feedback, both negative and positive, so that problems can be resolved quickly and are not allowed to persist. The schools we visited differed slightly in the intensity of their communication with parents and we just wonder if a less interested parent/carer might get turned off by excessive communication in e-mail format. Most parents probably prefer, however, to see problems 'nipped in the bud'.
 - 1.3.3 Pupils benefit from having **short-term goals** and recognition when they achieve them. Setting their own goals rather than having them externally imposed may be beneficial. The Fisher Family Trust data are widely used and appear to be helpful.
 - 1.3.4 The **curriculum** needs to be engaging and relevant. We noted that one school had particularly good results because they entered pupils for Business & Technology Education Council (BTEC) courses which will be disallowed in the league tables from next year. This poses a moral dilemma for senior staff - do you provide a course which is relevant to the needs of the pupil or force them into subjects that might count towards a higher league table position?

- 1.3.5 The **role of support staff** is clearly a key factor as some FSM and/or under-achieving pupils relate more easily to a person not seen to be a teacher. We were interested to see that one school has appointed a non-teaching member of staff specifically to 'chase up' the targeted pupils and see that they attend the reinforcement classes put on for them, or attend mentor interviews etc. Whilst the development of resilience and independence is crucial for most children, those who are more vulnerable are likely to benefit from additional support such as this. Concern was expressed about next year's school budget and the capacity of schools to employ non-teaching staff to support vulnerable pupils.
- 1.3.6 Improvement cannot be directed just from the top of the school hierarchy, important though this is. At **departmental level** there needs to be a strong focus on performance against targets and objectives, monitored and adjusted on a frequent basis. Although Key Stage 2 (KS2) Standard Assessment Task (SATs) were the main tool for base-lines, some schools used other standardised national tests (Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT), National Foundation Education Research (NFER), Middle Years Information System (Midyis)) to enrich their knowledge of the pupil's potential. Re-grouping pupils mid-year may be helpful but we would urge schools to wait at least until January to give pupils a chance to settle down.
- 1.3.7 The need for a clear set of **school rules and disciplinary expectations** is self-evident but it was pointed out to us that pupils who are not achieving well perhaps need a firmer structure than the most able. Clarity of expectation around the rewards, or reasonable penalties, for particular behaviours are essential.
- 1.3.8 The **high visibility of senior staff** at the beginning and end of the day, at breaks and lunch-times contributes to the sense of unity and purpose within the school.
- 1.3.9 Discussion of the performance, achievements and targets of FSM pupils needs to be a specific focus of **staff meetings** so that there is a school-wide recognition of the school's responsibility to all its pupils, not just those who do well. All the schools we visited said that they applied their remedial efforts to all pupils dipping below expected targets, not just the FSM pupils.
- 1.3.10 We were impressed by the schools' commitment to encouraging FSM pupils to take part in a wide range of **extra-curricular activities**. One school sets out a 'challenge' of activities that all pupils must achieve before they reach Year 11. These include not only extra-curricular activities but also a range of personal skill developments, such as public speaking, making a presentation, organising an event, doing something for charity learning independence through being away from home etc.
- 1.3.11 The use of the **Pupil Premium** (PP) was not discussed in great detail but it was recognised that extra money is available. We suggest that this ought to be used imaginatively, not just directed at increasing one-to-one supplementary teaching (which the Sutton Trust has shown to be the least effective way of improving performance). We regard it as good practice to use the PP to enable FSM pupils to enjoy extra-curricular activities and, for example, to learn a musical instrument or to take part in school trips.
- 1.4 None of the above comes as a surprise and we assume that most schools follow this approach to a greater or lesser extent. The question then is - why does it work in some places better than others? It probably comes down to the performance of the individual teachers and support staff. Watching colleagues in action and learning from them, within a school and between schools, can make a big difference.