

Dealing with Child Poverty in Edinburgh Schools

A report by Edinburgh Trade Union Council

What Can Be Done in 2020?

In 2019 Edinburgh Trade Union Council (ETUC) had two deputations to the City Council's Education, Children and Families Committee meeting. One in August and one in October. Our deputations, which consisted of the Secretary of Edinburgh TUC and representatives of the teacher's union, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), outlined that we were disturbed by the current level of child poverty in Edinburgh schools. At the second meeting in October the deputation supported the following motion which was debated by the Committee. The Committee approved the motion.

Motion by Councillor Arthur – Reducing Child Poverty and Hunger

“Committee:

Welcomes the moving testimony from Edinburgh Trade Union Council at the August Education, Children and Families Committee on the issue of child poverty and holiday hunger. Recognises that child poverty is rising in Edinburgh and that the City of Edinburgh Council, The Scottish Government and the UK Government have a duty to use their powers to reverse this trend.

Recognises the excellent work of Council Officers, community groups and faith groups in helping low income families and note;

- All Primary Schools across the City now provide access to a universal breakfast club;
- Discover! aimed at reducing poverty and food/financial stress over the holidays has reported increased access to community provision, support services and families feeling less isolated;
- Maximise! which works to improve financial resilience of families and has so far secured additional income of £946,623.50 for 398 families across the city.

Recognises, however, that many low income families still find it difficult to provide three nutritious meals per day during holiday periods when free school meals are not available.

To note the next Reducing Child Poverty report will come to the Education, Children and Families Committee in March 2020 which will include an update on the work ongoing to reduce child poverty and holiday hunger.

To request that this report also includes information on the feasibility of the Council doing more to tackle holiday hunger either alone or via increased partnership working in this area.”

Edinburgh TUC considered that we would like to feed into the preparation of the proposed Report with some points from the local trade union movement. In order to be better informed on what is happening in Edinburgh schools we arranged to interview poverty lead teachers. This was done with the help of Edinburgh EIS. We were able to interview teachers in three primary schools and two high schools. We also interviewed officers at EIS Headquarters in Edinburgh who support teachers who deal with poverty

issues all over Scotland. They were able to give us a Scottish Perspective on some of the issues.

All the teachers we interviewed described the **Pupil Equity Fund (PEF)**. This is money allocated by the Scottish Government (SG) to every school in Scotland. The SG says that:

“The Pupil Equity Funding is being provided as part of the £750 million Attainment Scotland Fund which will be invested over the current parliamentary term (2016 to 2021).

The Pupil Equity Funding is allocated directly to schools and targeted at closing the poverty related attainment gap.

Every council area is benefitting from Pupil Equity Funding and 95% of schools in Scotland have been allocated funding for pupils in P1-S3 known to be eligible for free school meals.”

We were informed that PEF funding is allocated on the basis of pupils registered (but not entitled) to free school meals. This means that poverty is significantly underestimated in terms of PEF funding. Statistics are given to schools about the numbers of pupils living in poverty which are based on postcode with each post code being within a ‘decile’ with 1 being the least affluent to 10 being the most affluent. One primary school said that if they were allocated funding based on the statistics, the number of pupils in deciles one and two, there would be three times the number of pupils that are registered for free school meals.

However, basing PEF on postal code statistics is not satisfactory because the statistics are well out of date. The statistics do not show the way poverty has got worse since 2017/2018 and is going to get worse as universal credit impacts. The statistics are not sensitive to the impact of precarious working. A family’s income may suddenly drop because of loss of hours of work, loss of a job, redundancy or loss of income when people are off ill and their earnings drop back to SSP. The PEF allocations do not take into account that poverty may get significantly worse during the one year period covered by a funding allocation.

PEF funding is not based on appropriate criteria that describe the child poverty challenges that schools actually face. PEF funding does not take into account significantly worsening poverty during the period it covers.

Teachers said to us that part of PEF allocations were spent on dealing with cuts in the City of Edinburgh Council budget. Some teachers informed us that the main use of the PEF funding was not to actually to close the poverty related attainment gap. Academic effects were secondary. The main use was to create a ‘safe’, ‘nurturing’ environment for children. The resources were used for pastoral care rather than better academic results. Of course better pastoral care does improve attainment when it comes to better spoken english, literacy and numeracy.

The feeling was that PEF allocations needed to be bigger and be based on a careful assessment of each school’s needs by the City Council in full and proper consultation with school staff and parents. The careful assessment must take into account the way schools

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needs will get greater as the financial year proceeds. Now that we will have a Tory Government for some time we can safely predict, from the way Universal Credit will operate, that child poverty will get worse in Scotland over the next five years unless action is taken in Scotland.

Furthermore, PEF funding is temporary in nature. Schools have real concerns about what will happen to projects they set up using PEF money when this funding stream dries up. The time limited nature of the funding has also been a constraint on what schools can do with the money, both in terms of staffing (for example, constraints on appointing permanent staff to PEF-funded posts) and in terms of projects (not wanting to initiate long-term projects that may not be sustainable without long-term financing).

Child Poverty - many aspects

Schools are dealing with many aspects of poverty. Because of the lack of money of parents schools have set up Food Banks themselves (with food provided by teachers and local shops and supermarkets). They have set up Clothes Banks. They have set up Breakfast Clubs which either have a nominal charge or are free. One school provided 70 breakfasts every day which was financed by local businesses. Breakfast Clubs seem essential in dealing with poverty (and childminding issues due to the nature of modern work) but are not funded by the City of Edinburgh Council. Schools are struggling to include all pupils in outings, including residential trips both in Scotland and abroad (for High School students who are studying a language). Schools sometimes have to assist children and their parent(s) in obtaining basic furniture such as beds. Schools have helped when they found out that children did not have beds (they slept in cupboards). Some pupils are suffering from sleep deprivation.

Some teachers bring food into their classes because children are not attentive due to not having eaten, possibly because they have been too late for the Breakfast Club. Teachers say that some disciplinary issues are simply due to hunger.

Schools try to maximise the income of parents by providing access to benefits advice. This is seen as helpful although one of the main drivers in increasing poverty is the change to Universal Credit. Organising full benefit entitlement in 2020 will not mean returning to previous benefit entitlement. This is particularly the case with disabled parents who are incapable of work and have more than two children.

Child Poverty in schools comes in a variety of contexts which require special services or adjustments to services within the school. In addition to financial help or help in kind there are the needs of these groups of parents to be taken into account: refugee parents whose first language is not English and whose children (in P1) may not speak English at all; children of parents who arrive in P1 without toilet training or clothes sense; children of disabled parents who have an inability to work because of their disabilities; children of parents with housing problems and facing eviction; children of single parents; students with lack of home support in preparing for the world of work; children caught up in relationship breakups; children caught up in a variety of stressful and traumatic situations including domestic violence and households where there is substance abuse. One example of a modern severe stressful situation is a single parent who faces a sudden drop of income because he/she is off ill; their normal income having dropped to SSP level.

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The experience of poverty and stress means that both children and parents contract mental health conditions or existing conditions are worsened.

The contemporary severity of a worsening problem means that the resources that are available to schools are used, not to improve attainment as regards literacy or numeracy or other academic/ learning targets but to provide a **safe** environment for children and students and a **nurturing** environment. The emphasis is on meeting the needs of children in terms of well being including emotional and social development. The main strategy of schools with a significant level of child poverty is **pastoral care**. For schools where this is not the main strategy overall it will, nevertheless, be the strategy for significant groups of children and parents.

Teachers say that no social grouping of parents and students in schools are immune from stressful and difficult situations, It is not just parents/children defined as living in poverty by the Scottish Government that need access to services that, as described above, are primarily for those in poverty.

More Money

Wherever it comes from schools need more money for Breakfast Clubs, after school Soup and Sandwich clubs, clothes, essential household furniture and to ensure that outings and trips are available to all pupils and students. Schools should not have to ration outings and trips that they think are socially and educationally essential because of lack of resources. The money needed by each school with its particular needs must be properly and comprehensively assessed.

More Staff

All the teachers we interviewed said that more full time or part time, well trained, staff were needed in schools to deal with child poverty. The staff that were mentioned were:

Out of class teachers: these are teachers who do not have specific year classes but are available to provide support to groups of pupils in areas such as English, literacy, numeracy and mathematics.

Homelink Teachers: these are teachers who visit parents and children at home and provide support within the home when the situation at home is impacting on the child's performance and behaviour at school. Homelink teachers can help furnish houses.

Pupil Support Officers (who are not teachers): they are teaching assistants who have had a lot of training. If the person has undergone a bit less training they are called Pupil Support Assistants. They provide support to children who, for example, have specific needs due to disabilities or who have undergone trauma classified as 'Adverse Childhood Experiences - ACE's'

Early Support Practitioners (not teachers): they will work in P1 classes and deliver play based training.

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Speech Therapists, a role that has been around some time, are more needed today in dealing with the effects of poverty and of migration.

Other staff that play a useful role are called **Health and Well Being Coordinators, Mindfulness Coordinators and Drama Specialists**.

Schools need access to **counselling services**, including mental health counsellors, for both parents and children. Some schools employ people with the use of PEF money. Some schools have arrangements with 'partner' organisations. Access to these services is essential and as the number of people living in poverty with associated health problems grow the resources for these services must grow.

The integration of all these services, and their associated databases, results in a big and increasing burden for school staff in addition to the burden of dealing with academic attainment.

All teachers spoke highly of the above staff and the contribution they make to their schools and the well being and development of children. Their work is very effective. There is, however, not enough staff or hours for part time staff to meet needs. As the poverty increases some pupils and parents will not receive the support they need.

Therapy pets were used in one school.

Special Rooms

All teachers spoke of the value of special rooms for pupils and parents where there is a calm environment achieved through drawing, painting and music with the assistance of trained staff. The rooms have different names such as the 'Therapy Room' and the 'Nurture' room.

Supporting BME Families

It was pointed out to us that BME parents and children, defined as being in poverty, have special needs which need to be addressed. There are language and cultural barriers preventing many families from accessing support. It is crucial that schools or a cluster of schools should have access to a specially trained and knowledgeable member of staff who would have the time and resources to provide support. There are special issues when a BME person has a disability.

Some High School Issues

The support that is required in High Schools can be different from a Primary School. This is because many students are carers for siblings, parents and others. Substance abuse by students rather than by parents is an issue. More support is required in preparation for the world of work. Household poverty can have the effect of lessening the home support that high school students require. In that sense the effect of poverty is getting worse in high schools.

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Teachers said migrant workers, as parents (even those living in poverty) were having a beneficial effect on their high schools because of the home support they provided to their children and their commitment to education.

Summary

Although the sample of schools we looked at was small, we have no doubt that extra resources are needed to deal with increasing child poverty all over Edinburgh. Schools need additional resources whether the percentage of children living in poverty in a school is 12% or 80%.

We repeat the need for individual school assessments with full consultation with staff and parents.

More funding can help schools deal with poverty, lessen the stress on staff, reduce violence in schools and improve the lives of pupils and parents. But, obviously, schools cannot do away with poverty. Other measures in society are necessary. Universal credit needs to be abolished and replaced with a fair system of benefits. A society wide culture that tolerates precarious working needs to change. There needs to be more integration between education and the health service to deal effectively with medical conditions engendered or worsened by poverty.

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