



# **Educational attainment gap – Role of the Third and Private Sectors**

## **Response to the Call for Written Evidence from the Scottish Parliament Education and Culture Committee**

**The UNISON Scotland Submission to the Scottish Parliament's  
Education and Culture Committee**

**March 2015**

## **Introduction**

UNISON is Scotland's largest public sector trade union. UNISON members deliver a wide range of services across every sector in education including nurseries, primary schools, and secondary schools further education colleges and universities as well as careers advisors in Skills Development Scotland. Our members are also midwives, health visitors and social workers. UNISON is able to analyse and collate their experience as service users and staff to inform the policy making process. UNISON therefore welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to Education and Culture Committee.

## **Evidence**

UNISON welcomes the committee's inquiry into closing the attainment gap. There is widespread agreement that children from low income households do significantly worse at school than those from better-off households and that this gap starts early and continues. There is also widespread agreement in Scotland that this gap needs to be tackled, that investment in support in children's early years will be the most effective route to enabling children from all backgrounds to achieve their full potential and that education in both schools and nurseries have an important role to play. There is though less agreement (and action) on implementing specific and targeted policies to achieve this aim.

UNISON firmly believes that comprehensive education provides the best route to achieve the aim of high educational attainment for all. There is plenty of evidence to support this.

Finnish schools top the world rankings not only for achievement but also for equity. In Finland they ensure: fair funding for all schools; school readiness through universal childcare and pre-school; focus on individual's well-being in schools and prevention rather than repair. Even writers in the free market champion *The Economist* accept that it is "Finland's no-choice, teacher knows best version of schooling that beats the world. That poses challenges, both for my orthodox free market beliefs and for other countries desperate to both bottle the magic and explore it"<sup>1</sup> In Finland, like Scotland, most education institutions are maintained by local authorities or joint municipal boards. There are no private schools, no grammar schools, no religious schools no academies.

While many countries have recently focused on more testing, extra hours in class and more school choice Finland has taken the opposite route. Children have less school hours, less homework and less testing than most other countries. Children go to their local state school. There is no "choice". Finland focuses instead on collaboration, personalisation, equity and trust based professionalism. Teachers and their students are not constantly tested and inspected: wasting hours on form filling and exam prep. There are very few exams. Schools are not in competition. Finnish children do consistently well across all schools.

Those, like the Conservative party, who favour strategies which take public money and give it to private companies often promote what they like to call "diversity and choice". This is because privatisation is unpopular. The free school model, like academies are all though privatisation. But fifteen years after they were introduced Swedes are concerned that their schools are slipping down league tables. Not only is their education performance falling it is also slipping back on measures of social mobility and equity.

UNISON's experience of academies and the loosening of local authority control in general in England make us very concerned about moving in that direction. Despite the vast amount of money poured into academies there is no evidence that they raise attainment any faster than maintained community schools.

There is insufficient evidence to show that academies are a model for school improvement" The academies programme has created a new centralised bureaucracy to provide the advice and support previously provided by the local authorities (as has the Free School programme). The current 203 academies are supported by 70 civil servants. This moves schools further from their communities. It is easy to see why heads may be tempted by the carrot of keeping the 10% of funding that currently sits with local authorities in England and Wales. Schools though then have to buy in services from the local authority or an alternative provider. That money goes very quickly.

Head teachers have to become procurement professionals sourcing materials, school meals and support such as educational psychologists. This can lead to reluctance by schools to take any pupils who may incur extra costs such as children with a additional support needs of challenging behaviour. Schools in England are now employing HR and business managers because of the work involved in purchasing and staff recruitment. Savings to pay for this are being made through cutting other jobs or taking staff out of national pay agreements and pushing down the wage. Support staff bear the brunt of the wage cuts.

UNISON's UK wide experience also shows that "parent led" schools are a myth. They are a stalking horse for edu-business. SERCO, VT Education, GEMS are running schools not parents. Funding through local authorities, far from being a drain on schools budgets, provides economies of scale for procuring goods and services and allows a pooling of the costs of those pupils who for a variety of reasons require extra spending. They are also able to manage the modernising of school buildings/building new schools.

In Sweden the Free Schools far from being well funded modern establishments tend to be housed in old office blocks. They have little in the way of modern equipment, many don't even have libraries. In England Free Schools teachers don't have to have a recognised teaching qualification.

The OECD policy priorities to improve educational attainment are

- Emphasise teacher quality over teacher quantity
- Ensure teachers have the best skills by making entry more flexible and making the criteria for selection more rigorous.
- Ensuring strong leadership within schools
- Continual development of teacher's skills

It was also indicated that for those children who were struggling, home visits, social workers in schools and more educational psychologists may be more effective ways to improve their outcomes. These can be accessed cost effectively via the local authority. Glasgow City Council found "nurture classes" to be effective. These give focused attention, including their social and emotional needs, to those who are struggling.

It is important to note though that Finnish success in world education rankings is not just about their school model. It is a country that values social cohesiveness, Finns pay relatively high taxes which provide the money for high quality services which all contribute to the well-being of their children. Their investment in early years and childcare also means that

when children start school aged 7/8 they start on a much more equal footing than their Scottish peers.

While the current focus on childcare is welcome UNISON is concerned that it is currently little more than a discussion round extra hours rather than how to deliver a comprehensive universal service that supports child development, reduces the attainment gap and enables families to combine work and childcare. There is still a early years education and childcare split in much of the discussion that takes place and for many families particularly those on lower incomes or seeking work there is no access to a service that is either affordable or has hours that mean they can go to work.

Childcare should be provided free at the point of use by the public sector. The current system is patchy, complex and expensive. Parents in Scotland pay 27% of their household income on childcare, compared to the OECD average of 12%. We need a radical overhaul of childcare provision to ensure that it provides what families actually want: a safe nurturing environment for their children doesn't cost the earth.

It's not just the high cost of childcare which creates a barrier for women trying to return to work. The system is patchy and hard to navigate. Places are hard find. Until you know what specific childcare is available then it's impossible to say what hours you will be able to work and vice versa. This is hard for those hoping to negotiate changing working patterns returning to their job and almost impossible for those trying to find new work.

There is no one place to go to find out what's available: local authorities don't even have to keep a list of what childcare is available, what it costs or monitor what demand for care is in their areas. The Scottish Government has no information on demand for childcare or what places are available. There is no statutory obligation to provide/organise childcare for under-threes except for those whose parents are in receipt of certain benefits or are "looked after". Many working parents use private sector nurseries not out of choice but because this is the only sector that has the places available at hours that enable parents to go to work.

Public delivery is the most cost effective way forward: money won't be lost to profit, and is where we will be best able to ensure a coordinated and comprehensive service. Public delivery also makes it easier to ensure that the workforce is properly paid and well qualified. Public delivery also gives better protection to childcare workers who need all the same rights and opportunities, for example flexible working, as other workers. Good terms and conditions are how you attract and keep skilled workers.

Evidence suggests that having well qualified staff, particularly staff with a degree level qualification working in a nursery is key to good outcomes for the children. Since 2011 managers and lead practitioners of a day care of children's service in order to register with the SSSC have to have or be working towards a level 9 qualification. The Education Scotland Report Making the difference: the impact of staff qualifications children's learning in the early years (2011) shows that of the nursery centres they had inspected: 27% of local authority centres, 28% of private centres and 13% of voluntary centres had one member of staff with a BA in Childhood Practice. In local authority centres 87% had access to a teacher, 39% of private sector nurseries and 32% in the voluntary sector. Those who are able to access nursery services in the public sector have substantially more access to staff with degree level qualifications.

The childcare workforce, particularly in the private sector, is not well paid. The knowledge and skills required, as with much work traditionally done by women, are not widely recognised or rewarded in the market. This needs to be challenged. Pay must reflect the skills, knowledge and reflective practice required to do the job. There is a substantial pay gap between the sectors. A brief survey of vacancies showed that the public sector is offering jobs at approx £11 per hour while the range in the private and voluntary sector was £7 to a high of £8.50. Where jobs were offered with an annual salary the public sector range was £19 to £23,000 a rate more in line with that being offered for managers in the private sector where some posts offered a £16,000 to manage a nursery. Only public delivery paid for via taxation can support appropriate wages for the skills required to deliver high quality childcare.

Developing the right childcare cannot be separated from improved maternity leave and flexible working rights. Families need time to look after their own children and a fair work/life balance. Supporting families to spend time supporting their children is also key to closing the attainment gap. If Scotland is to be the best place in the world to bring up a child then it is essential that we give parents the time to parent.

UNISON believes there that the voluntary sector has an important role in the design and delivery of public services. In particular they can articulate the needs of many groups who are often ignored by policy makers. This will be important in terms of closing the attainment gap. This is though not the same as handing over the delivery of education to voluntary groups. Private schools, which we believe play a key role in embedding inequality, should no longer be allowed charitable status. Allowing some children scholarships to elite institutions will not break down structural inequalities.

Being able to undertake educational enhancing activities is a key indicator of educational attainment. It is clear that better off parents have the financial resources to allow children to participate in a wider range of activities than their less well-off peers. Genuine charities can though, alongside schools, offer an equitable route to ensuring that children from less well off backgrounds get more opportunities to participate in these types of activities. There are a huge range of activities supported by the voluntary sector from school visits to theatre and historical/educational sites, bringing activities like sports coaching and arts and drama or groups like Nil By Mouth and Show Racism the Red Card who bring expertise to particular areas of the curriculum. These opportunities are vital for children's personal development and educational attainment. Going to see a live play makes it much easier to get good marks in English than just reading it in a book or out loud in the class. Those who have the least opportunity to undertake these activities out of school because of lack of money need to have these opportunities through school. The key to closing the gap is to ensure that participation is free at the point of use. Cuts in local authority funding, compounded by the council tax freeze, mean that the cost of so-called extracurricular activities like school trips, whether for a day or a week, and sports clubs are increasing borne by parents. These charges mean that far from narrowing the gap will see it grow.

**Conclusion**

UNISON is the largest public sector trade union in Scotland. We are able to analyse and collate members' experiences of the sector, as service users and staff, to provide evidence to the committee. UNISON believes that tackling inequality and its consequence, like the gap in educational attainment, are vital. This will require resources. There is no indication that the resources needed are being calculated far less allocated. UNISON welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the committee.

**For further information, please contact:**

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<sup>1</sup>The Economist Our Friends in the North 6th June 2008 [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)