



**Inquiry into the
Educational Attainment of
Looked After Children:
Response to the Call for
Written Evidence from the
Scottish Parliament
Education & Culture
Committee**

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

October 2011

INTRODUCTION

UNISON Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the call for evidence from the Health & Sport Committee regarding the Inquiry into the Educational Attainment of Looked After Children. UNISON Scotland has over 160,000 members, over 90,000 of whom work in local government and 50,000 in the health service. UNISON represents many members who work in the Children and Families area of social work as well as education, many of whom are involved with looked after children.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Many of UNISON Scotland's members work with children and young people who are looked after and placed away from home. This response is based on our members' experience of supporting these children and young people with the issues which affect their education, as well as on the views of young people they speak to.

It is important to say first of all that looked after children and young people do see school as important to their future and know that if they can do well at school they will do better in adult life. For some who can manage the rules and boundaries of school life, school can be a "safe place" which provides an opportunity for them to "achieve". However school also presents a number of challenges for looked after children and young people.

In our members' experience it is not fully appreciated how much looked after young people have to cope with over and above school.

Children looked after at home: The statistics show that those looked after children and young people who live at home often do worse in education than their counterparts who are placed away from home.

These children and young people who are looked after (for example, on a supervision requirement from a Children's Hearing) and live at home face a range of challenges. They may well live in households where parents are struggling to meet their care needs because of their own difficulties such as drug and alcohol misuse or parental mental ill-health. They may be affected by a range of poverty issues i.e. lack of money, food or space; and many of them will be young carers. All of this will affect the quality of their life, their ability to make the most of school and to do homework. It may also limit their out of school activities and their involvement in school trips.

Children looked after away from home: Of the children and young people placed away from home, even those in a settled placement may have a range of issues to manage, including contact with family members (or lack of contact for various reasons). These children and young people also have a number of meetings every year to plan for their future – meetings which could radically change the plans for them, and which they have to attend, with all the stress that can cause. They also have to deal with a wide range of adult professionals in their lives.

Looked after children and young people can also have many changes of schools. If they are placed at a distance from their home they may have to move schools when they become looked after and accommodated. If their placement changes, they may have to move schools again. Often decisions are taken on resource grounds i.e. where a placement can be sourced, rather than on "best interest" grounds i.e. a placement close to home/school. Children rarely have a choice in this.

When they move to a new school it is often at the same time as they are dealing with a range of other changes e.g. a new placement. Not only are they having to learn new rules at school, adapt to a new timetable (which is often very different from the one they had before) get used to new teachers and make new friends but they may also be having to get used to the different expectations of a new placement and making new relationships with caring adults.

School can sometimes be the safest place for these children and young people to act out their anxieties and reactions to change. However, this is not always understood by teaching staff who are dealing with a whole class full of young people.

Care leavers: It is also important to be aware of the challenges facing looked after young people as they come up to school leaving age. At the same time as they are sitting standard grade and higher exams, they may also be facing the prospect of moving on from their foster home or residential unit.

Although some Local Authorities have become much better at supporting young people to remain looked after well beyond their school leaving date, on average looked after children still leave care at a much earlier age than their counterparts who live at home. It is recognised good practice that they begin the preparation for moving on from care at an early stage (usually around 15.5 years) so even though many will not leave their placement for some time to come, this can still be an anxious time for them.

For some looked after young people who want to leave care at 16, this prospect will be hanging over them throughout their last term at school. This will be accompanied by a great deal of uncertainty about where they will live, how they will cope etc. All of this will affect their school attainment and schools need to be aware of their additional support needs at this time.

Learning Support: The role of learning support staff can be very important for these children and young people, especially (but not exclusively) for those in primary school. UNISON supported the extension of the Additional Support for Learning legislation to looked after children and young people, but there are real concerns that cuts to learning support across the country will mean that these children still won't get the support they need, or find their existing support cut.

WHAT WOULD MAKE THINGS BETTER?

Understanding and respect: Young people tell our members that they would like teachers to understand their individual situations better and to recognise how that impacts on them at school. Teachers who treat pupils with respect and who understand them and their situation, are cited by the looked after children our members work with as key to whether they succeed or fail in school.

Training for key school staff: In our members' experience, having designated "looked after children" teachers in every school has helped the situation to some extent. However, these staff need to be aware of the challenges which affect looked after children and young people, through appropriate and targeted training. This needs to be updated on a rolling programme, as the population of looked after children in many schools will be quite small. Therefore continual awareness raising is important.

Building relationships: It is also important that they (and the guidance staff) are able to build positive relationships with these children and young people to find out what will help them best to manage in school.

Sharing information with agreement: There is also a need to help other teachers and support staff to understand what looked after children and young people might be going through, without breaching their confidentiality. Looked after children teachers should seek the consent of young people to share information and should check out with them what they are happy to have shared and how best to present it.

Providing additional support: Additional support should be available to looked after children and young people if they are assessed as needing this. Local Authorities need to ensure that they have sufficient support for learning staff to meet the needs of looked after children and young people as well as the other children with additional support needs in the school. These support staff should also be trained and aware of the challenges which can affect looked after children.

Managing moves of school: When looked after children move schools there should be a robust procedure in place to ensure a smooth transition from one school to the other. Unfortunately schools do not seem to present the curriculum in a consistent manner so secondary school pupils can often find that when they move schools, even though they get to study the same subjects, the content has been timetabled differently; therefore they can find that they have completed a module yet to be taught and missed a module which they have not yet covered. This can affect both their ability to attain and their self confidence.

Support to achieve potential: Educational attainment, in the shape of qualifications, is important for all children, including looked after children and young people. However, for looked after children there may be a need to balance this with other considerations, and to encourage children to achieve their potential without setting the barriers too high.

Recognising success: All Children and young people respond to recognition of their achievements and to praise for their successes. This is equally true for looked after children. It is important that individual achievements are recognised as well as curricular attainments. For example, for some children, managing a full day in the classroom is a significant achievement that needs recognition. However, children and young people do not like to be made to feel “different” so teachers and learning support staff need to be very skilled to manage these situations sensitively and tactfully.

Diane Anderson

Information Development Officer

diane.anderson@unison.co.uk

Mike Kirby, Scottish Secretary

UNISON Scotland

UNISON House

14, West Campbell Street,

Glasgow G2 6RX

Fax 0141-331 1203

m.kirby@unison.co.uk