# The Good News…

**What schools in Wales are doing to reduce the impact of poverty on pupils' achievement**

# Wales Centre for Equity in Education

The Wales Centre for Equity in Education is a national policy and applied research centre dedicated to improving educational equity in Wales.

It is a joint initiative between the University of Wales and the University of Wales Trinity Saint David.

# Intended audience

Practitioners, including trainee and serving teachers; policy-makers and advisers; and other professionals working within the education sector.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

*There is talent too amongst them were it only cultivated, and in spite of poverty that talent will sometimes show through…but the incubus of poverty keeps the intellect of Wales in the dust. Give us but education, give us chware teg (fair play) and we will show you what the Welsh can do.*[1]

**John Hughes, a vicar from Aberystwyth, uttered these words in 1846 as part of a campaign to encourage the Westminster Government to fund the expansion of education in Wales. It was a lively time in Welsh education.**

The following year, an infamous report on the state of education in Wales revealed widespread poverty, which prevented many parents from sending their children to school. Since then, there has been undoubted progress in many areas of educational provision; children spend more time in school, they experience a richer curriculum, teachers are better trained and resources more stimulating. However, poverty continues to blight the educational outcomes of children and young people in Wales and the United Kingdom.

Like Hughes, we know it is not a question of talent. As former Education Secretary for England, Michael Gove, bluntly put it: 'bright, poor children' are less likely to do as well at school as 'rich, thick kids'.[2] Too many children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds[3] are falling behind their peers and not reaching their potential.

There is no single reason for this and it is not helpful to apportion blame. Responsibility is shared between parents, teachers, learners themselves, the wider community and policy-makers. The complexities of poverty are illustrated by wide-ranging government policies covering community regeneration projects, mitigation through welfare benefits, parenting programmes, mentoring initiatives, employment schemes and intense early years' support.  An important part of the answer, however, lies in the quality of teaching and leadership in schools.  Research (and common sense) shows that pupils taught by good teachers make greater learning gains than those taught by less effective colleagues. The Sutton Trust (2011) suggests that over a year, disadvantaged pupils gain the equivalent of 1.5 years' of schooling when taught by good teachers compared with half a year's progress with underperforming teachers.

Hughes called for 'fair play' – shorthand for the modern notion of schools promoting 'equality of opportunity'. But this is not enough. As Estyn, the Welsh inspectorate, recently put it: schools need a special focus on those children and young people who are growing up in poverty.[4]

The Welsh Government acknowledges that addressing the impact of poverty in education is one of the greatest, if not the greatest, challenges it faces over the next few years.[5] Focusing on disadvantaged pupils helps all learners. It unlocks potential musicians, artists, mathematicians, footballers and engineers whose talents make life better for all. It develops relationships and builds a genuine, caring and learning community.

The purpose of this publication is to point out that despite the challenges there is good news. There are schools throughout Wales who are making a significant contribution in reducing the impact of poverty on the educational outcomes for disadvantaged children and young people. Their stories show that the talent that Hughes spoke about can 'shine through' if cultivated. This requires commitment, care and concerted effort from staff across the school, working in close partnership with parents and the wider community.

This publication draws heavily on the Centre's Policy Observatory Project Report entitled *Reducing the Impact of Poverty on Educational Attainment*, available on the Learning Wales website.[6]  This report was funded by the Welsh Government and undertaken in collaboration with the Regional Education Consortia and the Wales Council for Voluntary Action. Each of the four Regional Education Consortia provided the research team with contextual and performance data collected between the academic years of 2008/9 through to 2012/13. Every primary and secondary school across Wales was included in the analytical scoping exercise. These were then matched against performance data indicators. A short list was then drawn up based on local knowledge from the consortia and Estyn to ensure appropriate geographical and phase balance.

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[1] *The Welshman*, 8 May 1846.

[2] Paton, G. (2014) 'Bright pupils seeing their talent 'squandered' at school', *The Telegraph*, 30 June 2014.

[3] Although children can be disadvantaged in various ways, in this publication the term is shorthand for those pupils who are eligible for free school meals (eFSM, a proxy for poverty).

[4] Estyn (2012) *Effective practice in tackling poverty and disadvantage in school*, Cardiff: Estyn.

[5] Huw Lewis, '*Child Poverty, Breaking the Cycle of Deprivation*', IWA journal May 2010 available at: http://wales.gov.uk/newsroom/articles childrenandyoungpeople/100507deprivation/?lang=en

[6] http://learning.wales.gov.uk/resources/browse-all/reducing-the-impact-of-poverty-on-educational-achievement/?lang=en

# 2 WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CHILD POVERTY AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT?

**Poverty can be defined and measured in two main ways.[7] On the one hand it can be seen simply as a lack of money and not having access to what others take for granted, not having enough basic resources such as food, clothes and household goods. The problem with this definition is that 'not having enough' does not necessarily make someone poor. It all depends on the context. Poverty in Wales is not the same as it is in Sub-Saharan Africa.**

There is clearly a world of difference between UK poverty in 2014 and poverty in a remote African village without electricity and running water. But there is also a huge gulf in wealth. So poverty is a relative concept – how well people live in comparison to the typical living standards in society at the time.

Poverty can be seen in a broad sense to cover everything that a person owns, access to community services, decent housing and social networks. The Welsh Government (2014: 10) simply defines poverty as 'a lack of money' and sees deprivation as referring to 'wider problems caused by a lack of resources and opportunities.'

What does poverty mean to children? UNICEF measure absolute child poverty on the basis of whether children lack certain listed items considered normal and necessary for a child in an economically advanced nation.[8] These include three meals a day, fresh fruit and vegetables, Internet access and regular leisure activities.

Based on 2009 data, around 6% of UK children were reported to be lacking two or more of these items. For these children, poverty means not eating properly, going without shoes for the winter, being cold at night, not being able to join in activities with friends and not enjoying a holiday. This is not to deny the fact that many parents struggling to survive make sacrifices for their children, trying to ensure that they do not miss out. But one of the defining characteristics of living in poverty is that having one thing always means not having another.

As they grow up, children living in poverty are less likely to gain decent qualifications, a good job and achieve a comfortable standard of living, when compared to classmates from richer homes. They are also more likely to experience health problems and live shorter lives. Higher percentages of poverty are to be found in urban areas, particularly Newport, Cardiff and the South Wales valleys. Families brought up in rural Wales also face particular challenges, such as fuel poverty and social exclusion. Children and families who live in disadvantaged towns or rural areas are the most likely to experience multiple social problems, such as drug abuse, high crime rates, family breakdown and generally a culture of low aspirations.

In terms of education, poverty continues to be a major barrier to success for many learners across the UK (Box 1).

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## The impact of poverty on children's attainment in school

- Children from poorer backgrounds lag behind at all stages of education.

- By the age of three, poorer children are estimated to be, on average, nine months behind children from more wealthy backgrounds.

- According to Department for Education statistics, by the end of primary school, pupils receiving free school meals are estimated to be almost three terms behind their more affluent peers.

- By 14, this gap grows to over five terms.

- By 16, children receiving free school meals achieve 1.7 grades lower at GCSE.

**Box 1: Poverty and educational attainment**

**Source: Child Poverty Action Group, http://cpag.org.uk/content/impact-poverty**

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[7] Relative poverty sets the threshold as 60% of median income, and moves each year as median income moves, while absolute poverty sets the low-income line of 60% of median income in 2010/11, and then adjusts it each year with inflation. See: http://data.jrf.org.uk/data/relative-absolute-time/

[8] UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre (2012) 'Measuring Child Poverty: New league tables of child poverty in the world's rich countries', Innocenti Report Card 10, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence. The list of items has since been revised.

**The Welsh Government (2014: 11) official figures are as follows:**

- by the age of 5, disadvantaged children will be over a year behind in their vocabulary compared with their peers from less disadvantaged backgrounds;

- eFSM (eligible for Free School Meals) learners in primary school in Wales are four times more likely to be persistently absent and three times more likely to be absent without authority than their nFSM (non-Free School Meals) peers;

- at the end of primary school in Wales three out of 10 children from deprived backgrounds fail to achieve the expected levels compared with only one out of 10 of their more affluent peers;

- eFSM learners in secondary school in Wales are four times more likely to be persistently absent and four times more likely to be absent without authority than their nFSM peers;

- by the end of secondary school in Wales only one in four eFSM 15-year-olds achieve the Level 2 threshold including English/Welsh First Language and Mathematics compared with six out of 10 of their more affluent peers;

- an eFSM learner in Wales is twice as likely to have a special educational need (SEN) and SEN learners are three times less likely to achieve the Level 2 threshold including English/Welsh First Language and Mathematics;

- learners in Wales that live in the most deprived areas are over five times more likely to become NEET (not in employment, education or training) than learners living in the least deprived areas and those who are eFSM are almost three times more likely to be NEET; and

- entry rates to higher education (HE) for 18-year-olds from areas with the lowest levels of past HE participation (considered the 'most disadvantaged') are around one third of the level seen among students from areas with the highest levels of past participation.

**This information highlights the importance of child poverty and deprivation.**

# 3   WHAT IS THE SCALE OF THE CHALLENGE AND WHAT PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE?

**1 in 3 children (200,000) in Wales live in relative poverty.**

**1 in 7 (90,000) experience severe poverty, with household incomes of less than £12,200 a year.[9]**

On both counts, Wales has the highest rate of child poverty in the UK.

It is difficult to agree an exact fix on the numbers of children in absolute and relative poverty because measures differ. According to the Westminster Government, around 2.3 million (17%) of children live in relative poverty in the UK, in homes with substantially lower than average income.[10] Children's campaigners argue that a further 300,000 children live in absolute poverty. If measured after housing costs are paid, the figure rises to around 3.5 million (27%). As the New Policy Institute points out, any decline in relative poverty can only be a good thing if the number below a fixed threshold falls too. The most recent European statistics indicate that 22.7% of UK children are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, but this is based on a combined measure of income, material deprivation and family employment.[11]

Across Wales and the UK there are marked differences in the extent of child poverty. The Child Poverty Action Group (2014) has published a map of the UK showing these regional variations, based on tax credit data (Map 1). As the report points out, this data is not a direct measure of child poverty based on the official definition, but it provides the closest to an equivalent measure for local levels of child poverty.

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[9] http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/save_the_children_wales.pdf. See also: Save the Children (2010) Severe Child Poverty in Wales, Cardiff: Save the Children and Welsh Government (2014) Rewriting the Future, Cardiff: Welsh Government.

[10] In 2011/12 the poverty threshold for a single adult was £128 a week. For a couple with two children it was £357. Department for Work and Pensions (2014) Households Below Average Income. An analysis of the income distribution 1994/95 – 2012/13, London:  Department for Work and Pensions, p.5.

[11] Eurostat News release, 26 February 2013.

**Map 1: Regional variations in child poverty across the UK**

**Source: MacInnes et al (2013: 55)**
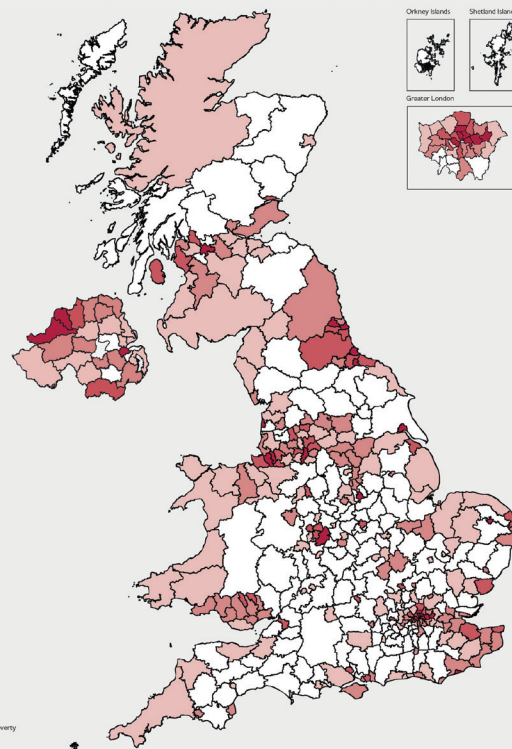


The good news is that none of the local authorities or parliamentary constituencies in Wales feature in the two top 20 lists of highest levels of child poverty in the UK, headed by Bethnal Green and Bow (49%) and Tower Hamlets (49%). The bad news is that neither do they feature among the lowest levels of child poverty (led by 9% at West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine and Shetland Islands at 10% respectively).

More generally, there is debate over how much progress has been made in Wales and the UK over the last decade or so in reaching the goal of eradicating child poverty by 2020. Both in absolute and relative terms, poverty in the UK declined between 1997 and 2011. Child poverty in Wales declined from 35% in 1998/9 to 33% in 2013. However this should not mask the fact that in some communities, such as the former industrial villages in the south Wales valleys, there is still severe or persistent poverty.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (MacInnes et al., 2013) summarises progress in terms of tackling poverty in general over the last 5 years using a simple scale: 'worse', 'no change' and 'better'. It suggests improvements in:

• child poverty rate;

• proportion of children not reaching expected standard at age 11;

• proportion of children not reaching expected standard at age 16; and

• FSM gap at age 19 for Level 3 qualifications.

It reports 'no change' in these areas:

• FSM 'gap' at age 16; and

• proportion of care leavers not in education or training or contact with social services.

The one area related specifically to children that has deteriorated is obesity levels among Year 6 pupils.

Generally, progress against child poverty in Wales has been slower than elsewhere in the UK. The Welsh Government, in *Rewriting the Future* (2014: 12), points out:

• eFSM learners in England are around 50 per cent more likely to achieve the Level 2 inclusive (five or more GCSEs, or vocational equivalent, at grade C or above) than eFSM learners in Wales at age 15;

• the North East of England region is the most socio-economically comparable to Wales. Here, eFSM learners are over a third more likely to achieve Level 2 inclusive than their peers in Wales; and

• in every region in England the rate of improvement for the performance of eFSM learners has been significantly faster than in Wales.

## Overview of programmes

Poverty is stubborn but not inevitable. Over the last 15 or so years, numerous programmes have been developed to assist disadvantaged children, families and communities (table 1). Some of these focus on improving access to services and facilities, such as free entry to historical sites, others provide support through individual mentoring and coaching for students. There are also family-centred interventions. What is clear is that there is no quick-fix solution to eradicating child poverty despite the Welsh and UK Governments pledge to do so by 2020.

| Date | Programme/measure | Content/audience |
|---|---|---|
| **2001** | **Communities First[12]** | Community-focused programme covering around 20% of the population of Wales, which aims to improve the economic and social outcomes for its target communities and the people who live in them. |
| **2006/7** | **Flying Start [13]** | Aimed at pre-school children (0-3) covering free quality childcare, parenting support, intensive health visitor support and support for early literacy. |
| **2006-10** | **Raising Attainment and Individual Standards in Education (RAISE)** | Focused on 648 schools experiencing the greatest incidence of deprivation amongst their pupils. Schools qualified for a RAISE grant if 20% or more of their pupils were eligible for free school meals, on basis of having 50 or more pupils of statutory school age. |
| **2011** | **Families First[14]** | Aimed at supporting children, young people and families, in or at risk of poverty, to achieve their potential. The programme, which focuses on prevention and early intervention, is locally delivered by multi agencies according to a Families First Action Plan. Fundamental to the programme is the Team Around the Family (TAF) model which encourages an early intervention approach. |
| **2012** | **Pupil Deprivation Grant[15]** | Targeted at raising the attainment of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (e-FSM) and Looked After Children (LAC). |
| **2014** | **Schools Challenge Cymru[16]** | Supports 40 'Pathways to Success' secondary schools who are most challenged in terms of delivery and circumstances. They are expected to work with primary clusters to raise standards. |

**Table 1. Examples of programmes and measures designed to tackle the impact of poverty on child development and educational attainment**

Even for the more established programmes, it is difficult to assess the impact on raising academic standards although there have been gains in student participation and engagement.[17]

[12] Welsh Government Social Research (2011) The Evaluation of Communities First, Cardiff: Welsh Government.

[13] Morris, M. and Willis, R. (2014) Flying Start Synthesis Report, Cardiff: Welsh Government, available at: http://wales.gov.uk/docs/caecd/research/2014/140131-flying-start-synthesis-report-en.pdf

[14] Welsh Government (2011) Families First: Programme Guidance, Cardiff: Welsh Government.

[15] Welsh Government (2013) School Effectiveness Grant and Pupil Deprivation Grant 2013 –2015, Cardiff: Welsh Government. Egan, D., Saunders, D. and Swaffield, E. (2014) Making Effective Use of the Pupil Deprivation Grant, Cardiff: Wales Centre for Equity in Education

[16] Welsh Government (2014) Schools Challenge Cymru: introduction for Pathways to Success schools, Cardiff: Welsh Government.

[17] Egan, D. (2013) Poverty and Low Educational Achievement in Wales, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

## Costs of poverty

It is difficult to isolate the impact of poverty on a child's life from other influences. However, the costs of poverty should not be underestimated (Figure 1). In economic terms alone, it is reckoned that child poverty costs the taxpayers at least £25 billion a year, of which £17 billion could be saved if all families were moved above the poverty line.[18] There is no doubt that reducing poverty brings all-round benefits to the individual, family, neighbourhood and wider society. There is a strong relationship between poverty and being unemployed or working in low-skill and low-pay jobs. Poverty is also linked to inequalities in health and life span – those people in the most deprived neighbourhoods live, on average, seven years less than those in the richest areas.[19]
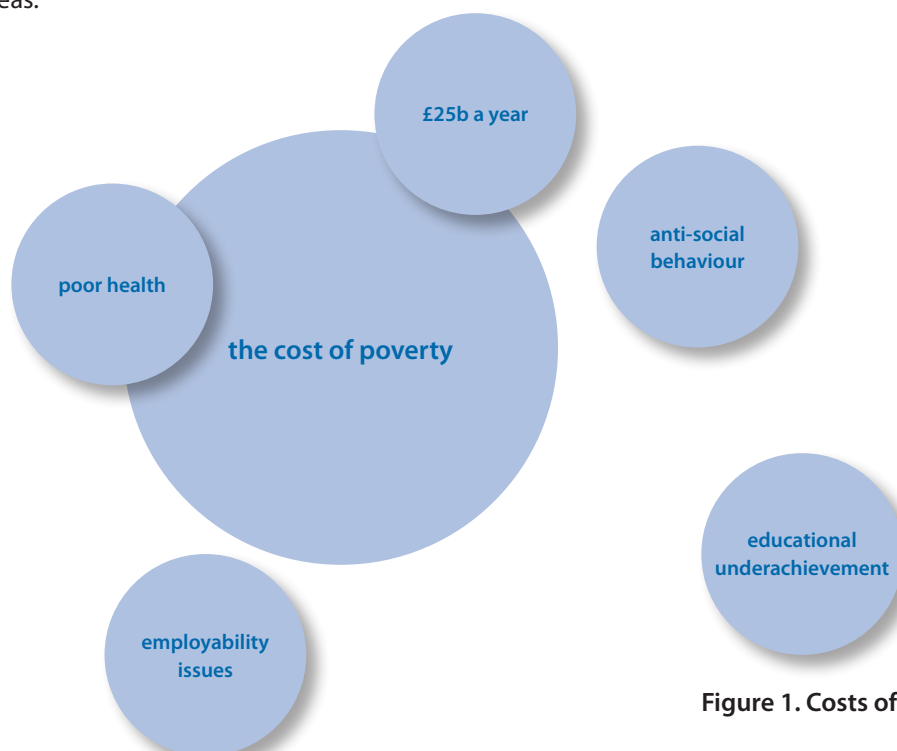


**Figure 1. Costs of allowing poverty to continue**

Clearly schools cannot tackle poverty alone. They need to be part of an integrated approach to what Adamson describes as the 'poverty triangle' of education, health and housing.[20] Schools need to work alongside other public services, families, employers and the government to combat child poverty. Similarly, Egan (2012) points out that solutions need to be applied holistically and should involve:

• more effective work by schools;
• greater parental engagement in the education of their children; and
• stronger links between schools, communities and community-based programmes.

## Where are we now?

There is a modicum of good news in Wales when considering the performance of pupils at end-of-phase tests.[21] The gap in performance between eFSM and non-FSM has generally narrowed over the last six years at Key Stages 2 and 3. In the Foundation Phase, the gap has decreased slightly from 2012 and stands at 17.6% in 2013. At Key Stage 4 the gap has narrowed in the past three years. However, this could be interpreted less positively. In 2012 only 3% more e-FSM learners than 2008 attained the expected level, whereas the figure was 7% more for their peers.[22]

[18] Hirsch, D. (2008) Estimating the costs of child poverty, York: JRF. See also Griggs, J. and Walker, R. (2008) The costs of child poverty for individuals and society. A literature review, York: JRF.

[19] Marmot Review (2010) Fair Society, Healthy Lives: The Marmot Review, London: The Marmot Review.

[20]Adamson, D. (2008) op cit. See also: Egan, D. (2007) Combating child poverty in Wales: are effective education strategies in place? York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

[21] Results are based on indicators of performance. The Foundation Phase Indicator (FPI) represents the percentage of pupils achieving the expected outcome or above in "Language, literacy and communication skills" (in English (LCE) or Welsh (LCW), "Personal and social development, well-being and cultural diversity" (PSD) and "Mathematical development" (MDT) in combination. The expected outcome of the majority of pupils is outcome 5 at the end of the Foundation Phase. The Core subject indicator at KS2-3 is defined as achieving the expected level in both Maths and Science and either English or Welsh first language. The expected level of the majority of pupils is level 4 at Key Stage 2 and level 5 at Key Stage 3. At Key Stage 4 it is defined as achieving a level 2 qualification at grade A*-C in both Maths and Science and either English or Welsh first language. Statistics for Wales (2014) Achievement and entitlement to free school meals in Wales, 2013, Cardiff: Welsh Government.

[22] Welsh Government (2012) Improving Schools, Cardiff: Welsh Government.

# 4 WHERE AND HOW ARE SCHOOLS IN WALES SUCCESSFULLY TACKLING POVERTY?

**Every school in Wales is unique. Each has its own mix of pupils, staff, managers and leaders, who work within diverse communities. This report highlights examples of practice drawn from school, family and community contexts, which have proved successful in significantly improving the outcomes achieved by young people living in poverty.**

**The case studies are as follows:**

1. Ysgol Glan Gele Nursery
2. Ysgol y Dderi Primary
3. Pencoed Comprehensive School
4. Ysgol Hen Felin Primary
5. Ysgol Uwchradd Tywyn
6. Oakdale Comprehensive School

7. Bishop Gore Secondary School
8. Ysgol Bassaleg Secondary School
9. Mount Stuart Primary School
10. St Mark's Church Primary School
11. Ely Caerau Federation Schools Community Partnership
12. Flintshire Parenting Strategy and Delivery Plan

They are located in areas of high social and economic disadvantage throughout Wales and yet achieve good outcomes for their learners (Map 2). This should not be seen as an elite club. There are other schools not mentioned in this report where teachers and communities are making a significant difference to the achievement of disadvantaged children. However, the simple fact is that the educational system in Wales needs to improve in addressing the impact of poverty on learners. Every school in Wales has the potential to improve the outcomes of all learners, irrespective of their contexts. Learning from best practice is one way of doing this.



Map 2. Location of case studies

The leaders and teachers in each case study have effectively narrowed and/or closed the achievement gap between pupils entitled to Free School Meals and those who are not. The specific interventions vary but for convenience are grouped by three inter-related themes: leadership, teaching and parental engagement.

- secondary
- special
- primary
- community

## Leadership

Not surprisingly, the case studies show that effective leadership is a key driver in tackling poverty. When leaders make a difference, they set the tone for colleagues by holding high expectations and succeed in raising pupils' aspirations (Figure 2).
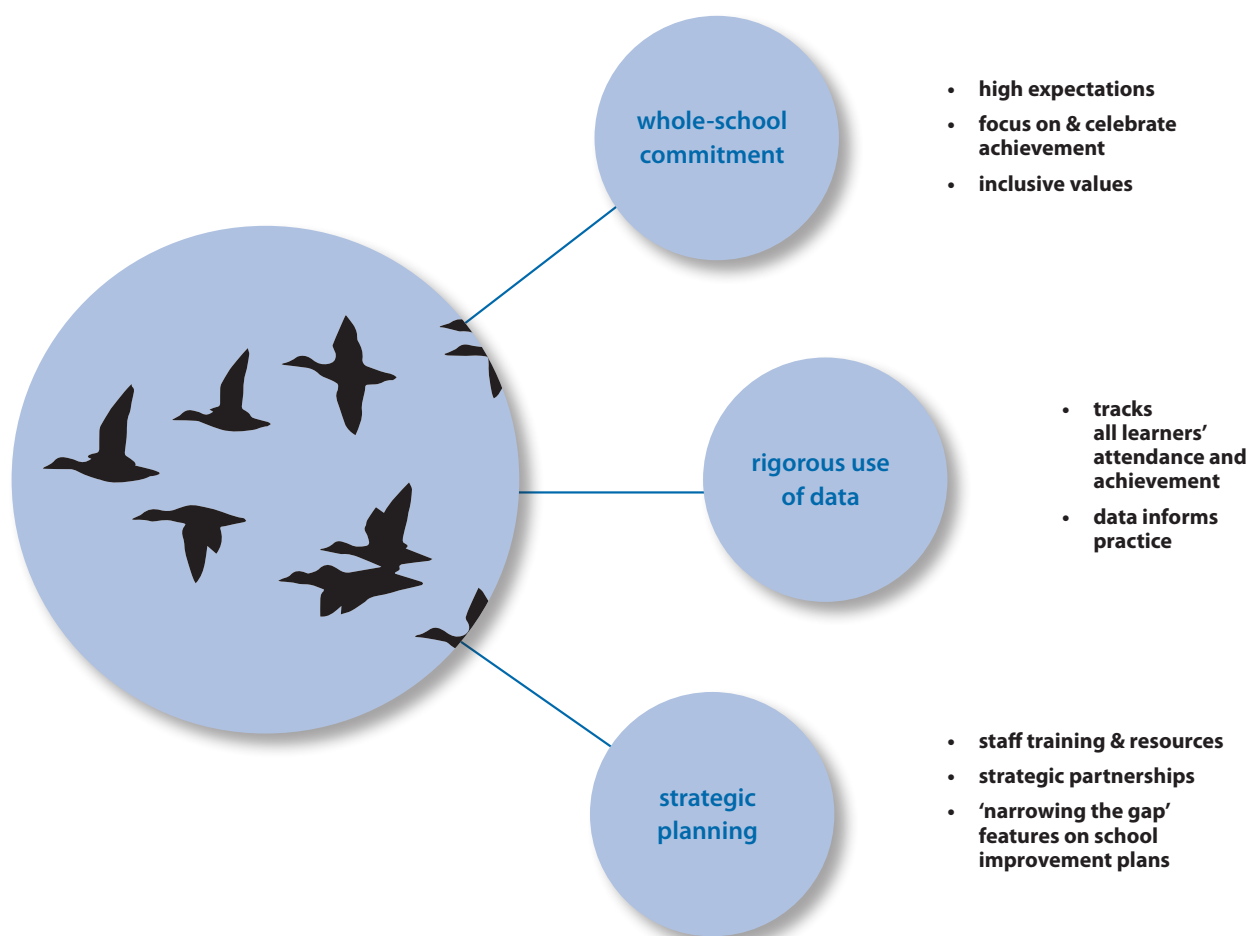
**whole-school commitment**

- **high expectations**
- **focus on & celebrate achievement**
- **inclusive values**

**rigorous use of data**

- **tracks all learners' attendance and achievement**
- **data informs practice**

**strategic planning**

- **staff training & resources**
- **strategic partnerships**
- **'narrowing the gap' features on school improvement plans**

**Figure 2. Aspects of leadership that make a difference**

One common characteristic of the case studies is the 'can-achieve' attitude adopted by staff and the self-belief that they can make a significant difference to the educational outcomes achieved by every child. They succeed in creating a purposeful learning environment.  Achievements are celebrated within and beyond the school (Box 2).

In some cases, a designated senior leader takes responsibility for monitoring the progress and achievement of disadvantaged children. This is set as a high priority, being at the forefront of whole-school improvement planning. There is dedicated time and other resources for staff training and evaluating interventions.

## 1000 club

In order to improve attendance and engagement, Pencoed Comprehensive School runs a 1000 club. At the start of term each pupil receives 500 points. Lesson by lesson they can earn positive points by either: high attendance, being active in class, being club members, and improving performance on half termly tracking.

The scheme is supported by sponsorship from local businesses and pupils get entered into a prize draw to win prizes such as bikes, scooters, electronic tablets, vouchers etc. The draw takes place at the end of term during the 'Celebrating Success Award Days' and attendance has dramatically increased at the end of term because of these days.

Pupils highlighted in the 'Green Banding' on the data system were given congratulation letters on the basis of being on or above target. Progression was also recognized for pupils who made significant gains in aiming to reach their target, i.e. moving from red to amber, or making significant progress between levels. Posters were put up around the school to identify and congratulate these pupils and names were also read out in assembly and communicated to parents.

**Box 2. Improving attendance and engagement**

Leaders also forge and sustain strategic partnerships with the wider community to enhance learners' experiences (Table 2).

| Partnership | School | Outcomes |
|---|---|---|
| **Ethnic Youth Support Team** | **Bishop Gore Comprehensive school** | Improvements in attainment and behaviour for targeted group.[23] |
| **Rotary Club** | **Ysgol Uwchradd Tywyn.** | Access to new experiences through sponsored events such as 'Young Chef' and 'Young Musician of the Year.' |
| **Eversheds solicitors** | **Mount Stuart Primary, Cardiff** | First opportunities for students to interact with professional people who model reading – as the acting headteacher explained: 'For some of our children, this is the first book they have owned.' |
| **Multi-agencies** | **St Marks Church in Wales** | The school has its own multi-agency hub which enables a range of professionals, such as attendance officers, behaviour support officers, educational psychologists, and advisor teachers, to share information effectively. |

**Table 2. Examples of strategic partnerships in the community**

These partnerships vary considerably in nature. But they share the goal of broadening children and young people's learning so that they can achieve and experience success. In so doing, leaders tap into the expertise of other professionals (Box 3).

Staff at Ysgol Hen Felin Special School work with CTC Autism,[24] an interdisciplinary team of enthusiastic professionals, to develop children's communication, social and thinking skills. Parents and practitioners are taught how to look at each child and understand individual in-depth differences e.g. motor, sensory, and behavioural processing systems, and then set goals around understanding each child's "way of being in the world". Children and young people become engaged because staff have been trained to create meaningful interactions and reduce anxiety to help them cope with the world. Families also benefit from knowing why children act the way they do, they are able to acknowledge, recognise, and understand behaviours and feel more confident in their interactions with their child.

**Box 3. Making the most of additional expertise**

[23] For further details, see: http://www.estyn.gov.uk/english/docViewer/209363.7/community-partnership-supports-disadvantaged learners/?navmap=33,53,159,

[24] http://www.ctcautism.co.uk/

## Teaching

**Teachers and leaders in the case studies share core values that underpin what staff and pupils do. These vary but revolve around believing in the potential of each child, caring about children's wellbeing and focusing on their achievement, summed up well by Ysgol y Dderi's motto 'Dysgu, Rhannu a Gofalu' - 'Learn, Share and Care' or by the comment of an Assistant Head at Bishop Gore Comprehensive: 'We don't give up on any pupil.'**

The quality of teaching is the key school-based factor, which ensures that all children and young people achieve well (Figure 3). At Bassaleg Comprehensive School staff reflect upon key questions relating to what outstanding teaching and learning look like. They have produced support materials, including a handbook, to develop a shared understanding among staff (Box 4).

## What does an outstanding lesson look like?

Staff at Bassaleg Comprehensive wrote a classroom handbook and developed and distributed guidance as to what they expect an excellent lesson to look like.

| Feature | Excellent |
| --- | --- |
| **Start of the lesson** | Objectives shared with and owned by students; links with new learning made explicit. Challenging expectations established; clear sense of pace. |
| **Engagement of students** | All students engrossed in their work. Students persevere with tasks and are highly motivated to succeed. |
| **Style of teaching** | Teaching is based on expert knowledge and is stimulating, enthusiastic, rigorous and consistently challenging. |
| **Teaching methods** | Teaching methods are imaginatively selected to deliver the learning objectives of the lesson, with a wide variety of activities to meet the needs of students with different learning styles and different abilities. |
| **Differentiation** | Demands of activities are matched sensitively to individual needs. All students extended in their learning. |
| **Independence of students** | Independence and collaborative work is very much in evidence. Students are aware of how to manage and extend their own learning. |
| **Relationships** | Excellent positive and supportive yet challenging relationships in classroom which are conducive to very high levels of personal development. |
| **Productivity and behaviour** | Time is used very productively for independent and collaborative work. All students are engaged in their own learning throughout the lesson, with excellent awareness of time. |

**Box 4. Quality teaching**

What emerges from the case studies and wider evidence is a recognition that teachers need to make lessons interesting, relevant and challenging. So how do they do this? Table 3 includes a few examples. But it should be noted that these strategies are often used for all learners within an inclusive approach.
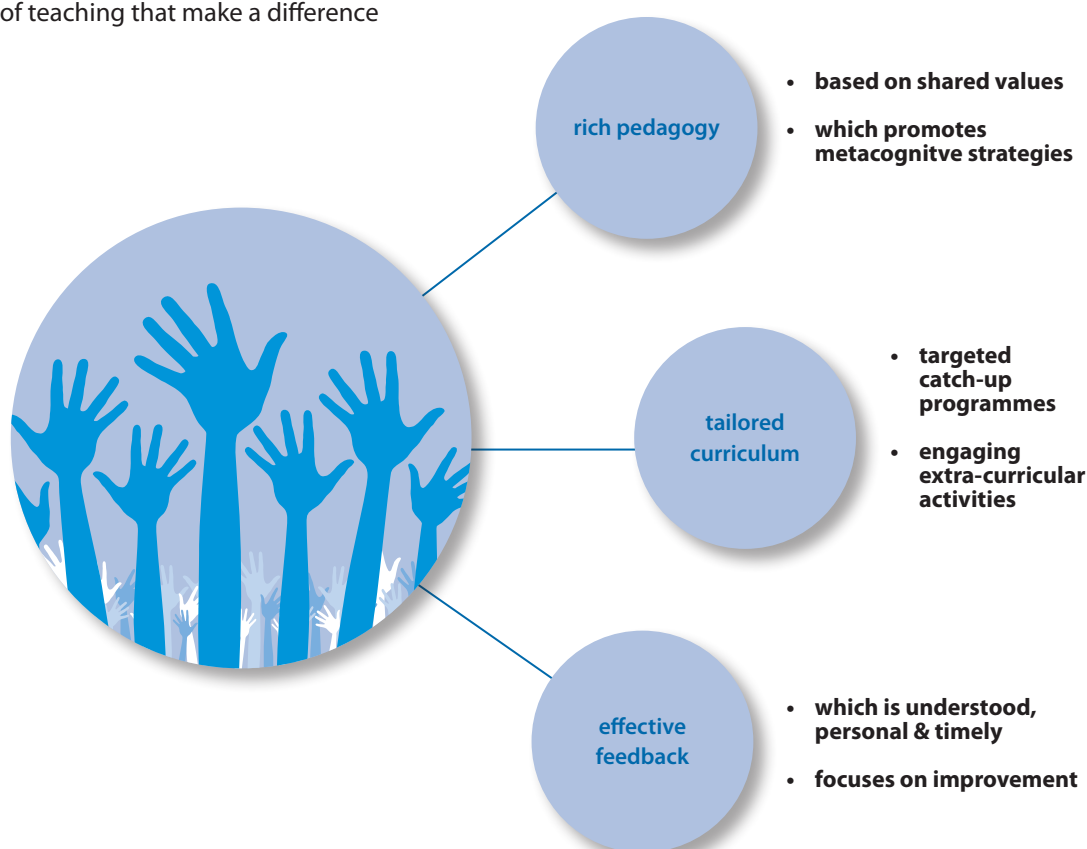
| Practical strategy | Examples |
| --- | --- |
| **Ask fewer but better questions** | A range of closed and open-ended questions such as 'How did you..?' and 'What if..?" |
| **Modelling** | How to solve problems, skills in finding and comparing information |
| **Draw on student's prior knowledge** | Mind-maps, focused 1-1 discussions, small group activities, self-assessment tasks |
| **Use metacognitive strategies** | Moral dilemmas, puzzles, challenges |
| **Make lessons relevant and topical** | Reference to current affairs, local news, popular culture |
| **Peer-to-peer learning** | 'Talking partners', older pupils 'teaching' younger ones, more able pupils coaching less able in a particular skill |
| **Effective feedback** | Summaries, use of rubrics, constructive oral and written comments, tutorials |

**Table 3. Examples of practical strategies used to engage all pupils**

Although Assessment for Learning strategies have been around for a long time, the original architects (Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam) believe that most schools are 'doing it wrong' because they have not understood the key principles. Where practice is less effective, teachers have focused on monitoring pupils' progress rather than developing pupils' learning and thinking skills.[25]

In the case studies, the curriculum (including extracurricular activities) is often tailored to meet learners' needs, interests and choices. Schools make effective use of catch-up programmes, which target mostly literacy skills. Invariably, there is a strong emphasis on improving attendance, behaviour for learning and building pupils' self-esteem, confidence and resilience.

Figure 3. Aspects of teaching that make a difference



**rich pedagogy**
- **based on shared values**
- **which promotes metacognitve strategies**

**tailored curriculum**
- **targeted catch-up programmes**
- **engaging extra-curricular activities**

**effective feedback**
- **which is understood, personal & timely**
- **focuses on improvement**

[25] Stewart, W. (2012) 'Think you've implemented Assessment for Learning?' TES, 14 April 2012.

## Parental engagement

We know that parents have a major part to play in their children's progress and achievement. Before children start school, those from more prosperous backgrounds overtake those from poorer ones in terms of language, social and emotional development.[26] One estimate is that children in poverty are at least six months behind the norm in school readiness.[27] What parents do in terms of pre-school educational activities plays an important part in explaining these differences. Children from poor households are less likely than those from wealthier homes to be read to each day, play number games, learn songs, chant nursery rhymes and paint.[28] The level of parental education and persistent poverty are the two main socio-economic predictors of a child's attainment in mathematics and reading. Findings from the Millennium Cohort Study in Wales estimates that a child of at least one graduate parent will be 9 months ahead of a child whose parents have no qualifications in mathematics and 11 months ahead in reading.[29]

Recognising the contribution parents make to the attainment of their children is one thing. It is quite another to engage parents who are unwilling or unable to enter school, let alone work closely with teachers. Strains occur when teachers feel unfairly criticised and/or parents feel patronized and unwelcome.[30] Many parents naturally see schools through the lens of their own experience, which may not have been positive. So schools need to break down attitudinal barriers and convince parents of the value in working closely with teachers.

The Ely Caerau Federation wanted to improve parental engagement, which fell away during the secondary schools years (Box 5). They invited learner groups to participate and advise on the kinds of things that could be done to give parents the opportunity to see what schools were doing. These pupils also reported that parents thought that there could be improvements to the organisation of open evenings, including the queuing and appointment systems. Parents also wanted:

- regular information;
- lots of good news;
- to be told as soon as possible if there was a problem;
- to feel valued; and
- that their children are valued.

The pupils found that text, phone and email are the best way to communicate with parents. Phone calls to parents that highlight the achievements of their children are particularly welcomed. Some schools use learning logs as a means of engaging parents (Box 6).

Pupils at Glyn Derw and Michaelston Community College secondary schools (part of the Ely Caerau Federation) worked with Dynamix, a social enterprise and workers' cooperative, to find out for themselves the kinds of barriers parents faced.

timing
confidence
lack of information
work
lack of childcare

**Box 5. Word cloud based on pupils' research showing barriers parents face to attending open evenings.**

[26] Children's Commissioner for Wales (2013) Child Poverty Strategy Progress Report 2013, Swansea: CCW.

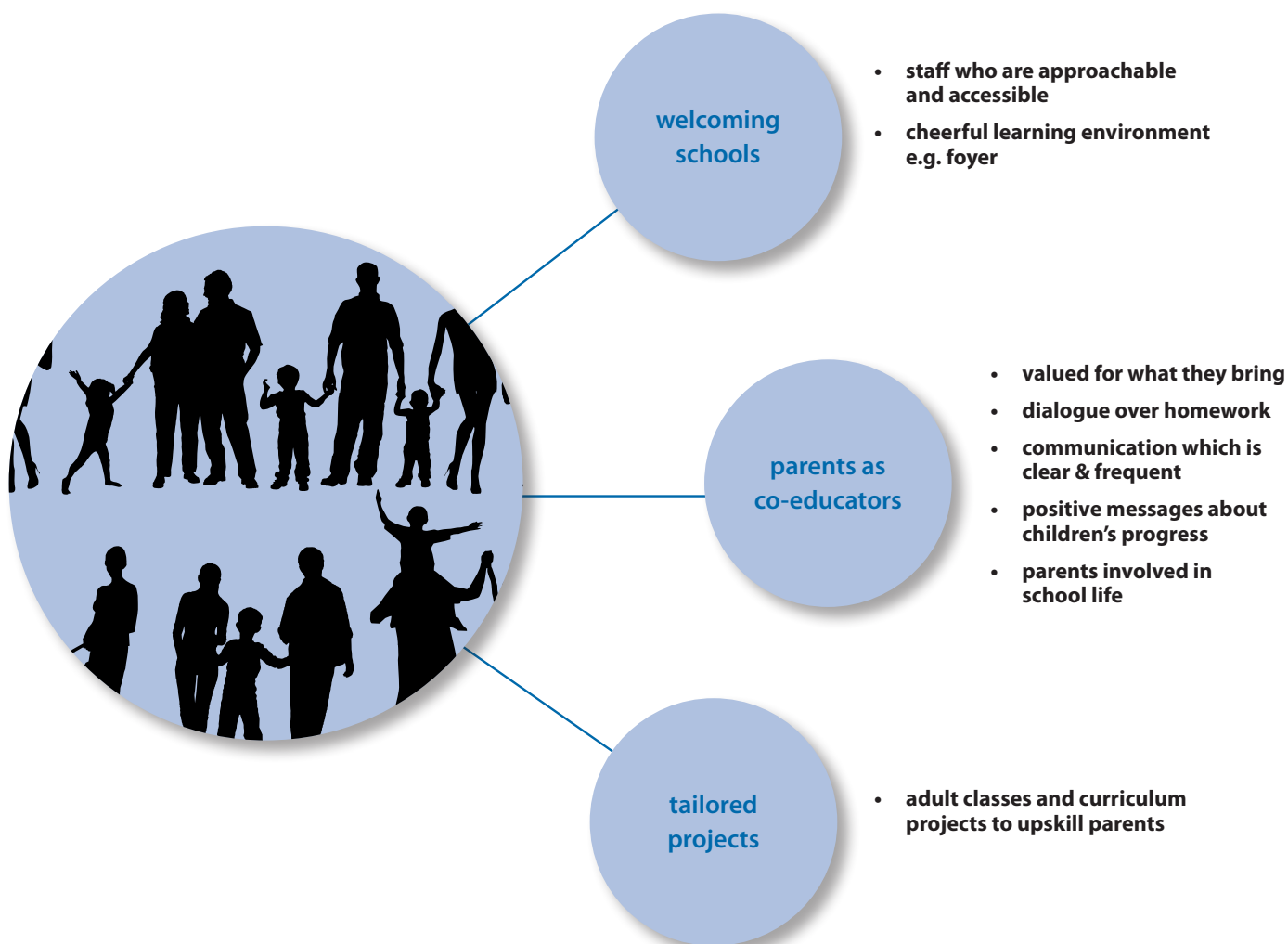[27] JRF (2008) Estimating the costs of child poverty, York: JRF.

[28] ESRC Parenting style influences child development and social mobility, available at:
http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/parenting-style-social-mobility_tcm8-20071.pdf

[29] Joshi, H., Ketende, S. and Parsons, S. (2011) Child Development at Age Seven in Wales:
Analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study, Cardiff, Welsh Assembly Government, p.17.

[30] Lall, M., Campbell, C., and Gillborn, D. (2005) Parental Involvement in Education, Sheffield Hallam University, available at:
http://extra.shu.ac.uk/ndc/downloads/reports/RR31.pdf.

All the case studies recognised the importance of parental engagement and set about promoting this in different ways. Several focused on developing parental confidence and basic skills through adult learning classes (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Aspects of school/parent relationships that make a difference**



**welcoming schools**
- staff who are approachable and accessible
- cheerful learning environment e.g. foyer

**parents as co-educators**
- valued for what they bring
- dialogue over homework
- communication which is clear & frequent
- positive messages about children's progress
- parents involved in school life

**tailored projects**
- adult classes and curriculum projects to upskill parents

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## Learning Logs

At Ysgol Glan Gele Nursery (Abergele) learning logs have been introduced for parents to support their children's homework. Learning logs provide parents with information on what children should learn each week. They are sent home each Friday and introduce the pupils and parents to the tasks and challenges for pupils the following week. Parents are expected to tell the class teacher either verbally or through the learning log if the child finds the work too difficult or too easy. The learning logs have been successful in developing a continuous dialogue between parents, pupils and school and have improved communication of pupil progress and individual targets.

**Box 6. Links with parents**

# 5  HOW DO WE KNOW?

**We now live in a data-rich society. Schools are increasingly expected to make use of data to inform their self-evaluation procedures. In 2009 the Welsh Government introduced the All-Wales Core Data Sets. These contain different graphs, tables and charts to illustrate:**

- a school's results against local and national performance;

- the difference in performance between girls and boys and between those pupils who receive free school meals and those who do not; and

- comparisons with performance of schools in similar contexts.

Such data raises questions about the performance of a school and trends over time.  The Welsh Government's My Local School website provides parents and others with access to school data (http://mylocalschool.wales.gov.uk/).

In the case studies, the data suggests that leaders and teachers have effectively narrowed and/or closed the achievement gap between pupils receiving Free School Meals and those who do not. This has not happened overnight. It has required planning, teamwork and determination.

Data alone cannot explain why a school does well.[31]  Test data is historic, does not represent the full story of what goes on in a school and rarely suggests how standards can improve. More qualitative sources, such as personal testimony from teachers, heads, advisers, parents and learners themselves, enriches our understanding of what works well and why. Hence, effective leaders continually survey the views of the people that matter, those who know what is and is not working, and who are at the receiving end of whatever the school tries. The promotion of learner voice has been advocated for many years. It only becomes meaningful when learners feel valued and see the outcomes of their contributions. Sometimes this means learning that it is not possible to satisfy everyone and that resources are finite. But when learners take part in open and informed discussions, they learn essential citizenship skills for school and later life.

[31] This would require the use of methodologies such as Randomised Control Trials. In RCTs, at least two groups are established, one of which receives the intervention and one does not.

# 6 WHAT DO OTHER REPORTS AND RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT WHAT WORKS WELL?

**The case studies confirm the importance of the following:**

- A 'no excuses' culture - while schools vary in context, poverty is not explained away in terms of factors beyond the control of the school.

- Clear leadership - leaders zoom in on low-achieving pupils, track and evaluate their performance and implement strategies designed to raise standards.

- High quality teaching – all pupils feel valued and cared for; they are motivated by the learning experiences and, through effective feedback, know how to improve their learning.

- Strong parental engagement – schools make every effort to engage parents, including those who are rarely seen in school.

- Active community links – schools see themselves as the centre of community life.

**The case studies show that improvements in learning for all pupils can be attributed to a combination of factors. This supports what is reported elsewhere about effective schools in challenging contexts. Estyn, for instance, highlight that these schools:[32]**

1 take a whole-school, strategic approach to tackling disadvantage – they have a structured, coherent and focused approach to raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners;

2 use data to track the progress of disadvantaged learners – they gather information from a range of sources and use it to analyse the progress of groups of learners;

3 focus on the development of disadvantaged learners' literacy and learning skills;

4 develop the social and emotional skills of disadvantaged learners – they understand the relationship between wellbeing and standards and often restructure their pastoral care system to deal more directly with the specific needs of disadvantaged learners;

5 improve the attendance, punctuality and behaviour of disadvantaged learners – they have suitable sanctions, but find that reward systems work particularly well;

6 tailor the curriculum to the needs of disadvantaged learners – they have mentoring systems that guide learners through their programmes of study and help them to plan their own learning pathways;

7 make great efforts to provide enriching experiences that more advantaged learners take for granted – they offer a varied menu of clubs, activities and cultural and educational trips;

8 listen to disadvantaged learners and provide opportunities for them to play a full part in the school's life – they gather learners' views about teaching and learning, give learners a key role in school development, and involve learners directly to improve standards;

9 engage parents and carers of disadvantaged learners – they communicate and work face-to-face to help them and their children to overcome barriers to learning; and

10 develop the expertise of staff to meet the needs of disadvantaged learners – they have a culture of sharing best practice, provide opportunities for teachers to observe each other, and have performance management targets that are related to raising the achievement of disadvantaged learners.

International evidence also confirms that extensive professional development is behind the most successful programmes in raising standards for all learners.[33]

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[32] Estyn (2012) *Effective practice in tackling poverty and disadvantage in school*, Cardiff: Estyn.

[33] NFER (2013) NFER evidence on access and achievement of children in poverty in England, Slough: NFER.

# 7 WHAT NEXT?

**John Hughes was right. We know that given the right educational opportunities, disadvantaged children and young people can achieve their potential. Of course, it should not only be left to schools. But the quality of school teaching and leadership are critical drivers. Where these are good, disadvantaged children benefit the most because their starting points are behind their more affluent peers.**

Leaders and teachers have a professional duty to look outwards, to learn from others. They are privileged because they have access to the greatest knowledge in the history of the profession. For example, through leading-edge websites, they can see what others do to close the gap without leaving their own classrooms. However, given that within many schools there is considerable variation in the quality of learning and teaching, it is essential that teachers learn from more immediate colleagues. Sharing best practice has become something of a cliché in education. But it is the case that in the most effective schools, teachers are never static and are continually learning themselves– they see lesson observation, for example, as a professional entitlement and welcome opportunities to be observed and to observe.[34] If school leaders are serious about tackling poverty, they should work with colleagues to develop systems which enable them to gain a clear and accurate picture of what learning is like for disadvantaged learners and what learning could become. In practice this means all schools making regular and effective use of the following:

- classroom observations;
- learner, teacher and parent surveys;
- scrutiny of learners' books;
- learning walks;
- communication with parents/carers; and
- discussions with learners.

Appendix 1 includes suggestions for further reflection.

The achievement gap can be narrowed as the case studies mentioned in this publication and others have demonstrated. But it is not only about narrowing the gap. It is a question of establishing and maintaining shared high expectations among pupils, parents and teachers. Sir John Dunford, the Pupil Premium Champion in England, recently asked head teachers to set the ambition of becoming one of the schools where the achievement of pupils eligible for free school meals is higher than those pupils who are not, currently confined to around 17% in England.[35] The same challenge extends to schools in Wales. Huw Lewis, the Education and Skills Minister, points out:

*It is not good enough to use poverty as an excuse for underachievement. High expectations should be set for all pupils, irrespective of background.[36]*

Child poverty is not inevitable and all those involved in education have a key contribution to make in achieving this goal. Inequality on the basis of deprivation should be the concern of all schools and all practitioners.

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[34] Estyn (2014) *Effective classroom observation in primary and secondary schools*, Cardiff: Estyn.

[35] Dunford, J. (2014) 'The big challenge for our generation of school leaders. Using Pupil Premium to narrow the gap', Achievement for All National Conference, 6 October 2014.

[36] http://wales.gov.uk/newsroom/educationandskills/2014/8854435/?lang=en

# 8  WHERE CAN I FIND OUT MORE?

## Reports and other publications

Adamson, D. (2008) '*Still Living on the Edge?*', in Contemporary Wales, 21: 2, 47-66.

Egan, D. (2007) *Combating child poverty in Wales: are effective education strategies in place?*
York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Egan, D. (2013) *Poverty and Low Educational Achievement in Wales*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

End Child Poverty Network Cymru (2009) *Child Poverty and Social Exclusion in Rural Wales*,
Cardiff: End Child Poverty Network Cymru.

Estyn (2012) *Effective practice in tackling poverty and disadvantage in school*, Cardiff: Estyn.

MacInnes, T., Aldridge, H., Bushe, S., Kenway, P. and Tinson, A. (2013) *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion 2013*, York:
Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

NFER (2013) *NFER evidence on access and achievement of children in poverty in England*, Slough: NFER.

Sutton Trust (2011) *Improving the Impact of Teachers on Pupil Achievement in the UK*, London: Sutton Trust.

Wales Centre for Equity in Education (2014) *Reducing the impact of poverty on educational attainment*,
Cardiff: Wales Centre for Equity in Education.

Welsh Government (2010) *Child Poverty Strategy*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

Welsh Government (2013) *Building Resilient Communities*, Cardiff: Welsh Government.

Welsh Government (2014) *Rewriting the Future*, Cardiff: Welsh Government.

## Websites

Wales Centre for Equity in Education is a national policy and applied research centre focusing on all forms of disadvantage associated with low educational achievement in Wales – http://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/wcee

Joseph Rowntree Foundation is a leading charity, which has been researching poverty for over 100 years. The website includes many publications and links - http://www.jrf.org.uk

Estyn, the Welsh inspectorate, includes best practice case studies - http://www.estyn.gov.uk

Learning Wales is the Welsh Government website which includes all key policies and news - http://learning.wales.gov.uk

My Local School provides key performance data on schools - http://mylocalschool.wales.gov.uk

The Bevan Foundation is a Welsh think tank on social justice, named after the great Welsh hero Aneurin Bevan - http://www.bevanfoundation.org

The End Child Poverty Network Cymru is a coalition of organizations focused on the eradication of child poverty in Wales, coordinated and managed on a day-to-day basis by Children in Wales
- http://www.childreninwales.org.uk/our-work/poverty/end-child-poverty-network-cymru

# APPENDIX 1 REFLECTIVE TOOLS

Table 4 offers four general questions for schools to feed their discussions about what they can do about poverty. The first question asks teachers, assistants and heads to have an open discussion about their own experiences and why all schools should take the poverty agenda seriously. The other questions examine aspects of provision.

| Question | Consider |
|---|---|
| **1. How do I/we see child poverty?** | • Personal and professional experiences<br>• Definitions of poverty<br>• How the media presents poverty<br>• Why doing something about poverty matters<br>• How you might view poverty if your child was the subject |
| **2. How well do we know the children in our school who are experiencing poverty?** | • Their backgrounds<br>• How they see themselves and are viewed by others<br>• Their interests, fears, hopes and dreams<br>• What it might mean for a child leaving the school without appropriate literacy and numeracy skills |
| **3. Are we doing enough to support and challenge them?** | • Opportunities for learners and parents to share their views<br>• Tracking arrangements<br>• Targets and follow-up<br>• Data findings with similar schools<br>• Previous and current achievement levels<br>• Level of challenge, relevance and interest in tasks set including homework<br>• Quality of questioning through the school<br>• Quality of feedback<br>• What a day in the life of a disadvantaged child is like in our school |
| **4. How well do we reach out as a school?** | • What visitors see and feel when they come to the school<br>• Ways of communicating with parents/carers<br>• How well parents engage in the life of the school<br>• The quality of communication with multi-agencies<br>• How the community sees the school<br>• How well teachers learn from each other<br>• How well we learn from other schools and organisations who are leading the way |

**Table 4. Four general questions to reflect upon in meeting the challenge of addressing the impact of poverty on educational attainment**

Checklist 1 provides a checklist for teachers and leaders to consider as a team, seeking to maximize their efforts to improve the achievement of disadvantaged pupils.

## 12-point checklist

**As a school, do we (or how well do we)…?**

1   Have a strategic plan that sets out how to improve the achievement of pupils entitled to FSM? ☐

2   Track and review their performance each term? ☐

3   Make explicit high expectations in terms of achievement and attendance? ☐

4   Set and monitor appropriate targets for pupils to develop their literacy and numeracy skills? ☐

5   Use effective teaching strategies so that pupils are able to learn, such as peer-to-peer learning? ☐

6   Provide timely and clear feedback so learners know what and how to improve? ☐

7   Provide an appropriate range of extracurricular activities to engage learners? ☐

8   Pick up early any social or emotional difficulties learners face and provide appropriate support? ☐

9   Set and follow a very clear and fair system of rewards and sanctions? ☐

10  Engage parents in an on-going two-way dialogue? ☐

11  Build partnerships in the community to broaden pupils' learning experiences? ☐

12  Evaluate any interventions such as catch-up programmes and the deployment of additional adults? ☐

**Checklist 1. Prompts to consider as a whole school.**