

## **Introduction**

UNISON is Scotland's largest trade union with members across the public, private and voluntary sectors. UNISON members work in a range of settings in nurseries, schools, health services and across local government delivering education and care services for children including those with additional support needs. UNISON therefore welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the inquiry into Poverty and Attainment.

## **Evidence**

The enormous gap in qualifications between children in poor and wealthy areas in Scotland is simply a reflection of the inequality that scars Scottish society. A well fed child living in a comfortable warm home is going to find it easier to take part in education than one who is hungry and cold. Ending the poverty related attainment gap requires eradicating poverty itself. That requires a range of measure including decent benefits for those who can't work and decent wages and secure jobs for those who do. That does not mean that action cannot be taken to reduce the impact of poverty on children's attainment. This will require investment in a range of public services not just schools. The services also need to work to work together. This is why it important that education services are embedded in local authorities where links to social work, libraries, youth work, leisure and cultural services as well as social work, welfare rights, education psychologists and housing can be best co-ordinated.

As the Poverty and Inequality Commission paper<sup>1</sup> states :

*"Action on education needs to have a two pronged approach: addressing the poverty related barriers that prevent children from fully accessing education, and raising educational attainment in order to reduce the likelihood of poverty in adulthood."*

A key driver of attainment is the chance to undertake educationally enhancing activities. These bring knowledge, skills, confidence and resilience to those who take part. It is clear that better-off parents have resources to allow their children to take part in a wider range of activities than their less well-off peers. For example, going to see a play live makes it 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 do these activities out with school need to have these opportunities in school. Sadly cuts in local authority funding mean that the cost of school trips, in school activities, music lessons and sports clubs are increasingly falling on parents. These are burdens that many families cannot meet and their children are losing out.

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<sup>1</sup> Poverty And Inequality Commission <https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Child-Poverty-Delivery-Plan-advice-Final-Version-23-February-2018.pdf> Page 33

The attainment gap is a long standing issue but the last ten years of austerity has made it worse. Cuts to a range of local government services mean that families are no longer able to access a range of support. In schools cuts to classroom assistants, school libraries, technicians and educational psychologist mean that children aren't getting the what they need.

Last year, in probably one of the biggest surveys<sup>2</sup> of school support staff ever in Scotland, our members reported; heavier workloads, job cuts, lack of educational supplies, and dirtier schools. This is while pupil numbers and education support needs are increasing. This means that children are not getting the support they need to achieve their full potential. Parents who are better off are able to spend their own money to make up for cuts in school support whether that's materials, tutors music lessons or other educational enhancing activities other's miss out.

There are 6707 more pupils since 2010 in Scottish schools, but there 1841 less support staff and 1389 less teachers. This means fewer classroom assistants, technicians, librarians and administrative staff. Our report confirmed the enormous stress this puts on support staff.

- 54% of support staff say budgets have been cut,
- 40% carry out unpaid work to meet workloads,
- 60% say morale is low, and
- 80% say workloads are heavier.

Services like school libraries are closing. Science classes have fewer opportunities for hands on experiments. Many report stress from the lack of training and support they receive for the tasks they are asked to carry out – like administering medicines or caring for pupils with challenging behaviour.

The new Scottish government report on behaviour in schools<sup>3</sup> found that there has been an increase in low-level disruptive behaviour since 2012. Staff also reported that it is this type of disruptive behaviour that has the biggest negative impact on their experience in schools.

Head teachers, teachers, support staff and pupils all agree that there is a clear link between having sufficient support staff in a classroom and positive behaviour in that classroom. Staff also felt that the reduction in support staff combined with growing numbers of pupils with ASN had resulted in a shortage of one-to-one support for pupils and a wider negative impact on behaviour.

Again in line with UNISON's research, it is clear that support staff do not have enough time for discussions with class teachers about pupils or involvement in whole school discussions about behaviour and relationships in schools. Headteachers also indicated that cuts in non-school based support for pupils with additional needs are also impacting on the level of support available to pupils. It is also clear that when resources in schools are stretched in general then that has an impact on other aspects of school life which could promote positive behaviour. It is children from less well off backgrounds whose parents cannot buy them extra support who suffer most when schools are short of resources.

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<sup>2</sup> Hard Lessons UNISON Scotland 2017 <http://www.unison-scotland.org/library/20170109-Schools-Damage-Series.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Scottish Government Behaviour in Schools 2017 <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0052/00526338.pdf>

Child Poverty Action Group's Cost of a School day report<sup>4</sup> gives an excellent overview of the issues faced by those on low incomes and offers different ways of working to ensure better opportunities. There is not space here to cover the whole report but it is clear that attending school places significant financial costs on families. As school budgets are being cut and alongside that the loss of staff, these issues are getting worse instead of improving. There is lots of evidence of the growing costs of even the basics for children attending school.

"the commission also heard however, about examples of other costs being shifted from schools to families, for example as expectations that all families will have access to a computer and printer and be able to print out material that is part of core learning"<sup>5</sup>

Cuts to budgets mean that parents have to pay for music lessons, materials for art, woodwork and cooking classes or their children miss out. There are also the basic supplies to support study: note pads, pens, pencils, past papers, study guides, a warm quiet place to study. Curriculum for Excellence means that homework can take a number of forms and require lots of home research which requires internet and computers: Children are expected to produce power point presentation, films, cartoons, 3D models, and cake models not just written papers. These all cost money. The children from better-off families are still able to access a range of educationally enhancing and confidence building activities out with school: sports clubs, art clubs, and drama clubs because their parents can buy them. Here in UNISON we have been told by members on low wages or zero hour contracts of instances of their children, knowing the sacrifices their parents would make to find the money, not even telling parents about school trips. They'd rather miss out than see their parents suffer. These costs mean that far from narrowing the gap it will grow.

Schools in wealthier areas also have more access to parents who can financially support the school's fundraising activities so those schools have more resources available. This again widens the gap as some schools are then better funded. It does also create issues for those children attending those schools whose parent are not able to contribute whether to fundraising events or pay the increasing range and rate of charges to take part in activities that the school organises for those who can pay. If the discussion in English focuses on the play that a proportion of the class got to see live, those who only see it read out in class or read it themselves are at a huge disadvantage. The same is true for trips to historic sights, field trips and science centres.

School libraries have been cut, many are only open part-time and there are fewer professional librarians in them to support research skills. While the internet gives us all access to more information than ever before, working out what is and isn't credible is a more vital skill than ever. Public libraries are also facing cuts, with reduced opening hours, fewer libraries and fewer professional staff in them when they are open. Those children who cannot get that support from parents are again losing out because of cuts to that support in schools. Libraries and school libraries in particular should be vital tools in closing that attainment gap. They should be places where those without computers, wifi and books at home can go and find the information they need to support their education. Where they can work in a quite warm place writing up essays and projects. They should also be staffed with information professionals who can provide the support needed to

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<sup>4</sup> CPAG <http://www.cpag.org.uk/cost-school-day>

<sup>5</sup> Poverty Commission 2018 <https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Child-Poverty-Delivery-Plan-advice-Final-Version-23-February-2018.pdf> page 33

evaluate sources and learn how to properly undertake research. Many pupils whose parent's don't have these skills cannot get this support at home even if they do have computers and printers.

Instead both public and school libraries have experienced severe budget cuts<sup>6</sup>. The situation has resulted in a highly-varied level of provision that reduces equity of access including:

- Only 11 out of 32 local authorities who have a full time qualified librarian in every secondary school, every day;
- 19 Councils with part time librarians or a mix of librarians and library assistants in their secondary schools;
- One Council (Argyll and Bute) with no school librarians;

Our members also tell us that there are serious issues with the lack of support available for children with Additional Support Needs (ASN). We have some great strategies and policy commitments to supporting children with additional needs but these have not been matched with adequate funding to enable their implementation. Schools do not have enough money for recruitment, training and support for the staff needed to meet those needs.

There is also still widespread misunderstanding about who is actually working with these children and young people on a day-to-day basis. Again and again, in policy papers and inquiries, the focus is on teachers, teacher training and improving their skills and knowledge, these are not the workers supporting children. It is support workers, pupil support assistants and classroom assistants. There needs to be training and professional development for all the staff working with those children.

Parents often have to fight to get the additional support their child needs. This means that access to additional support is based on how able your parents are to win that support. East Renfrewshire has much higher rates of children with dyslexia than for example North Lanarkshire<sup>7</sup>. Is there an epidemic of dyslexia or are parents there better able to get a diagnosis? Even when parents (who are able to fight) "win" that fight there is no additional funding attached to implement the decisions. Any additional provision comes out of the school budget. This therefore has an impact of provision of services for other children relying on that budget. There then needs to be funding to meet those costs. It is also clear that there is a risk that those from better-off backgrounds have higher chances of winning those battles and so further increasing the attainment gap.

Any serious attempt to improve educational attainment has to start well before children get to school - that's why early learning is so important. In UNISON Scotland's [submission](#) to the Scottish government's 'Blueprint 2020' for early learning and childcare, we place an emphasis on the quality of the services and the need for public provision. As the JRF<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Chartered Institute of Librarians and Information Professionals in Scotland Briefing for John Swinney 2018  
<http://www.cilips.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Briefing-for-DFM.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Dyslexia Scotland  
[http://www.dyslexiascotland.org.uk/sites/default/files/page\\_content/Dyslexia%20identification%20vs%20SQA%20referrals.pdf](http://www.dyslexiascotland.org.uk/sites/default/files/page_content/Dyslexia%20identification%20vs%20SQA%20referrals.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation Creating An anti-Poverty Childcare System 2016  
<https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/creating-anti-poverty-childcare-system>

report makes clear creating an anti poverty childcare service requires a supply side solution. We need to make sure that we learn the lessons of the adult care sector where we now have a fragmented service, which is costly and hard for users to navigate, with varying quality of service and a race to the bottom for staff terms and conditions. The money follows the child schemes proposed in the consultation have a high risk of creating a service based on low paid and unqualified staff. It risks creating a two tier system where those who can afford to pay more on top will have access to better nurseries than those on low incomes.

UNISON fully supports the government's aim of closing the poverty related attainment gap. In order to achieve this the government needs to reverse cuts to local government budgets and to invest in the whole school team to ensure that all pupils get the support they need to achieve their full potential.

## **Conclusion**

UNISON is Scotland's largest trade union with members across the public, private and voluntary sectors. UNISON members work in a range of settings in nurseries, schools, and health services and across local government delivering education and care services for children including those with additional support needs. Every day they see the impact of poverty on the attainment of the children they work with. Many members also live in poverty and see the impact on their own children. UNISON fully supports the commitment to close the attainment gap but cutting local government budgets and the numbers of people working in schools to support children will widen the gap. UNISON therefore welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Inquiry into Poverty and Attainment.

**UNISON Scotland**  
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