

Case study

What Works in Tackling Poverty

West Dunbartonshire Council – Improving Education for Children Living in Poverty

What are case studies?

Case studies share what people and organisations have learned from delivering or developing a project or programme. They can help you to see what has worked on the ground and can give you ideas about how to tackle problems. They can also signpost you to people and organisations you may want to talk to.

West Dunbartonshire Council

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In a nutshell

West Dunbartonshire Council recognises that low income in a family is a strong predictor of poor educational achievement.¹ It also recognises that for families living in poverty, parents face a range of barriers that might prevent them from supporting their children in the way they want to.

In order to address educational inequalities, multiple aspects of disadvantage in children's lives needs addressed. West Dunbartonshire has embraced the positive role schools can play in tackling poverty, promoting healthy lifestyles and supporting parental engagement in a child's learning and development through initiatives such as:

- Families and Schools Together (FAST) in partnership with Save the Children
- Hungry for Success – A Whole School Approach to School Meals

¹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Experiences of Poverty and Educational Disadvantage, 2007



The issues

In Scotland there are around 260,000 children living in poverty with 'in-work poverty' rising sharply since 2003/4.²

A stark inequality in society is the educational experiences of children living in poverty compared to that of their classmates. Research has shown that the UK has one of the steepest socio-economic 'gradients' in education among similar countries meaning that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to get good educational qualifications.³ The achievement gap begins early and widens thereafter:

- By the age of 3, children living in poverty are 9 months behind in 'school readiness'
- At each stage of compulsory schooling, the poverty gap grows. In particular, there is a big jump early in secondary school, with poor children nearly two years behind by the age of 14⁴
- Being in a family poor enough to qualify for free school meals halves a young person's chances of getting to Level 5 in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.³

A primary cause of child poverty is a lack of opportunities among parents with low skills and low qualifications. The task of balancing the economic demands of raising a family and the need to find time to devote to children is much harder for people in low-paid jobs with limited power to negotiate working arrangements. Where parents have to make a choice between low income and long hours, it is difficult to give children good life chances and support them in the way they would otherwise want to.³

The extent to which poverty and disadvantage persist in some families from one generation to the next is heavily influenced by achievement at school. Closing the opportunity gap in education is therefore an important part of combating long-term causes of disadvantage.

² Poverty in Scotland 2011; see chapters 5 and 21

³ Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Experiences of Poverty and Educational Disadvantage, 2007

⁴ Child Poverty Action Group; Chicken and egg: child poverty and educational inequalities, September 2007

The approach to the issues

One of West Dunbartonshire's approaches to tackling poverty and educational inequalities is through the 'Hungry for Success' model of promoting healthy lifestyles and supporting parents. This includes the provision of free school meals, free milk and breakfast clubs.

Free School Meals (P1-P3 pupils)

Poor diet is recognised as a significant contributor to Scotland's poor health record. Improving children's diets can have a major impact with beneficial outcomes for physical well-being, improved health in later life and the potential to impact on educational attainment.⁵ The case for free school meals is based on three key arguments:

Tackling Poverty

A significant number of children living in poverty in Scotland have no right to free school meals, particularly those from households where parents are in low paid work. Extending entitlement to free school meals helps increase the disposable income of the poorest households (by over £25 per week).

Improving Health

There is considerable evidence that adequate nutritional standards in school meals could make a significant impact on children's health. Further evidence suggests it would improve cognition, attendance and classroom behaviour. Health and nutrition experts tell us:

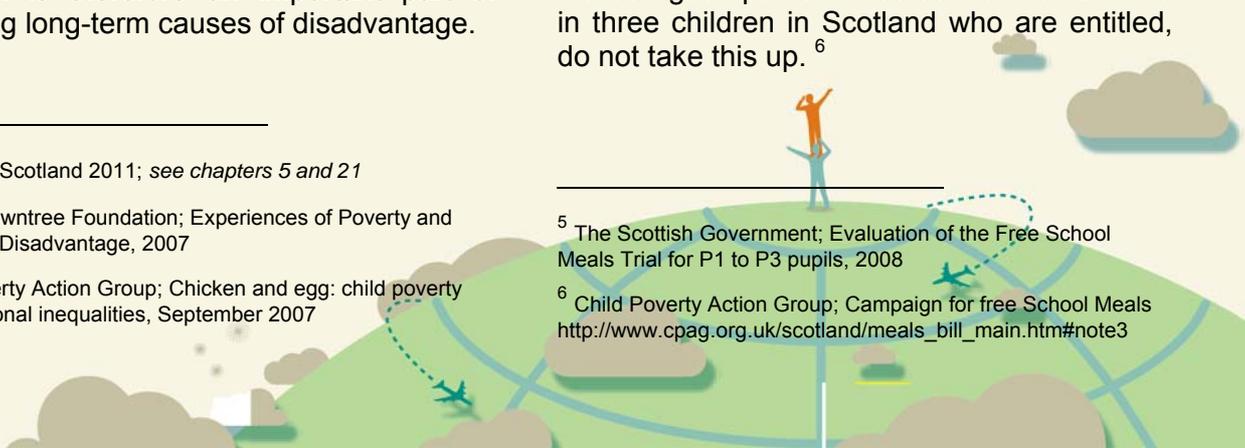
- Adult dietary patterns are learnt in childhood
- Poor diet in children is linked to disease in later life
- Scottish children eat only two of the five recommended daily portions of fresh fruit and vegetables
- Three quarters eat no green leafy vegetables at all

Reducing Stigma

Means-testing creates stigma which discourages uptake of free school meals. One in three children in Scotland who are entitled, do not take this up.⁶

⁵ The Scottish Government; Evaluation of the Free School Meals Trial for P1 to P3 pupils, 2008

⁶ Child Poverty Action Group; Campaign for free School Meals http://www.cpag.org.uk/scotland/meals_bill_main.htm#note3



West Dunbartonshire Council Free School Meals Pilot 2009/10

A free school meals trial was initially commissioned by the Scottish Government for P1-P3 pupils from October 2007 to June 2008 in five local authorities in Scotland – East Ayrshire, Fife, Glasgow, Scottish Borders and West Dunbartonshire. For an evaluation of the trial visit:

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/236867/0064986.pdf>

West Dunbartonshire Council are the only local authority from the trail to commit to a further pilot project. Evaluation from this pilot shows:

- Uptake of school meals in the 2009/10 West Dunbartonshire pilot for p1-3 pupils increased to 72% (this is an increase of 11% from the 07/08 trial)
- Head Teachers feel that the pilot has been worthwhile
- Comments from parents and pupils on the quality of meals and on the pilot in general have been positive

Lessons Learnt

- Being a smaller local authority has allowed for a real co-ordinated approach to roll-out
- Involving the catering team from the outset has been crucial to winning their buy-in
- The catering team have been central to the creative approach to meal planning, designing menus and healthy eating plans and in co-ordinating consultations with the children on meal choices
- To keep parents involved, it has been essential to adopt a strategy of forward planning to allow children to take the menus home and make decisions together with their parents
- In hindsight, initial marketing for the pilot with parents should have commenced earlier and should have been wider reaching to include consultation groups / events over and above letters and posters
- Stronger links with parents would allow for better evaluation of success in terms of impact on children's eating habits, health and well being

Hungry for Success

West Dunbartonshire Council recognise however that food in schools is not just about lunchtimes. The 'Hungry for Success' approach promotes consistency across what is taught in the classroom with what is provided in school dining rooms, breakfast clubs, tuck shops, vending machines and after-school clubs, for example.

Free Milk

In order to present consistent, informed messages about healthy eating West Dunbartonshire Council offer free milk to all primary school children.

Breakfast Club

The importance of a healthy breakfast is mainly to ensure that children start the day well. In West Dunbartonshire, 23 Primary Schools, one Secondary School and one Special Needs School all currently have breakfast clubs. There are *vending* breakfast machines in the remainder of Secondary Schools. The charge for breakfast is 25p but for children in receipt of a clothing Grant they pay 10p. As well as benefiting children's health and social interactions, they also help to improve children's attendance, punctuality and educational performance at school. For parents the benefits are two fold:

- Support in providing structure and nutrition for children when parents are under pressure financially or unable to for themselves due to other social, family or health reasons
- Free, informal childcare for working parents who value the convenience of an earlier start at school. This, again, helps to increase disposable income for poorer households.

In West Dunbartonshire, although slow to build momentum and buy-in, the breakfast clubs are now valued by staff, schools and parents. The catering team has again been central to co-ordinating the programme and providing cover to manage early shifts.



The Impact of Parental Involvement on Children's Education

Parents, carers and family members are by far the most important influences on children's lives. Between the ages of 5 and 16 children spend only 15% of their time in school.⁷

Research shows:

- Parental involvement in children's education from an early age has a significant effect on educational achievement, and continues to do so into adolescence and adulthood
- Family learning can also provide a range of benefits for parents and children including improvements in reading, writing and numeracy as well as greater parental confidence in helping their child at home
- The attitudes and aspirations of parents and of children themselves predict later educational achievement.⁸

What are the challenges to becoming more involved?

- Work commitments are the most commonly cited barrier by parents from getting more involved in their child's school life
- Other barriers include childcare issues / the demands of other children and lack of time generally
- Children of parents with the poorest grasp of literacy and numeracy are at a substantial disadvantage in relation to their own reading and maths development.⁸
- Parents from lower income groups are amongst those who find it most difficult to be involved in their children's education. Factors linked to poverty, such as crowded housing, unemployment, limited access to transport and cultural resources, illness and isolation are all barriers to engagement
- Parents' own experience of schooling and cultural capital also conditions their involvement in children's learning.⁹

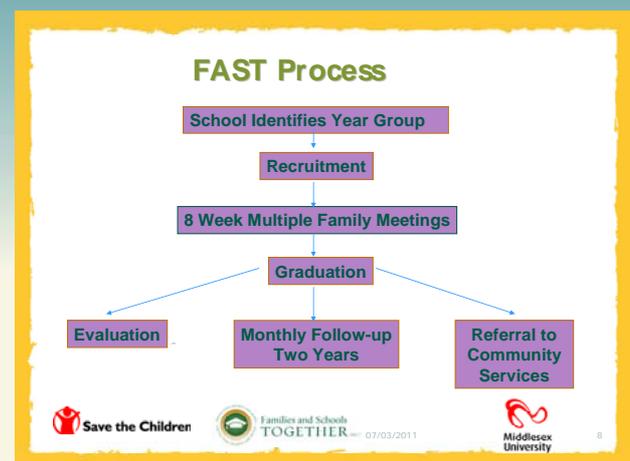
Families and Schools Together (FAST)

FAST is an award winning, UN endorsed, prevention and early intervention programme designed to strengthen family bonds, enabling parents to better support their children's education, take a more active role in their child's school and play a greater role in their local community. FAST doesn't target families, it is open to all. The programme is evidence based and has been successfully implemented across 2,500 schools in 15 countries and is active in 20 local authorities across the UK.

FAST enables children to:

- Succeed in school because of improved attainment in reading, writing and maths, improved behaviour and better home-school relationships - **improvements noted by teachers after 8 weeks**
- Live in supported and strengthened families because of improved parent-child bonds, parental confidence and parental self-esteem - **78% of parents have a better understanding of their children and less conflict in the home**
- Live in stronger communities with increased trust, community participation and reduced social isolation - **74% of parents have more friends, support and a stronger voice in the community**

FAST process



⁷ Scottish Government; Making the Difference: A New Law to Support Parents, 2006

⁸ Department for Children; Schools and Families: The Impact of Parental Involvement on Children's Education, 2008

⁹ Save the Children; Improving Educational Outcomes for Children Living in Poverty through Parental Involvement in Primary Schools, 2007

FAST weekly sessions

Over 8 weekly sessions each family shares a meal together and takes a turn cooking a meal for the other families. Parents are in charge of the weekly activities at the family table and the activities are designed to encourage family interaction and play. Parental empowerment and stronger family bonds are thus encouraged:

- **Family Unit at Family Table.** A review of family rituals has found that routines are powerful organisers of family life that offer stability during times of stress and transition
- **Parents' Time.** More profound learning occurs for adults if they express their own voice within a group of others who listen and exchange ideas
- **Special Play.** Non judgemental and non-directive, the parent child bond is nurtured and strengthened
- **Lottery.** Every family gets the chance to win a hamper and cooks for the other families. People help each other.

FAST in West Dunbartonshire

West Dunbartonshire Council entered into partnership with Save the Children to deliver a FAST pilot during April 2010 to June 2010. Save the Children led a collaborative, multi-agency team, including parents, professionals and staff from Linnvale Primary School.

17 children aged 3-5 participated in the multi-family groups, successfully graduating. The data collected from teachers and from parents has been compared before and after FAST for each child. For example:

- Hyperactivity was rated by all as a problem, but decreased significantly across home and school. These changes will help the children learn at school
- The family relationships were significantly strengthened at home
- Families also reported helping other families out much more than before FAST

Some quotes from Linnvale FAST families

"I love FAST families and I love spending time with my mum"

"I would never have gone into school before FAST. I feel happy there now. I can go in and talk if I need to."

"FAST was great"

"The children loved it and I got to know the teachers"

"I'd love to do it again."

What next?

West Dunbartonshire Council's partnership with Save the Children will continue to go from strength to strength with two further FAST sites planned in schools.

Since the Linnvale FAST programme a core group of four families have set up their own FASTWORKS group after graduation (funding is provided for a further two years). Two more families have since joined. The group meets monthly and they, along with other FAST families have met with potential funders to advocate for the programme. They're also on board to help recruit parents for the next FAST site in West Dunbartonshire.

West Dunbartonshire Council will be collaborating with Save the Children plans for two other programmes; In My Back Yard and Eat, Sleep, Learn, Play, which will be launched in the autumn.



Scottish Centre for Regeneration

This document is published by the Scottish Centre for Regeneration, which is part of the Scottish Government. We support our public, private and voluntary sector delivery partners to become more effective at:

- regenerating communities and tackling poverty
- developing more successful town centres and local high streets
- creating and managing mixed and sustainable communities
- making housing more energy efficient
- managing housing more efficiently and effectively

We do this through:

- coordinating learning networks which bring people together to identify the challenges they face and to support them to tackle these through events, networking and capacity building programmes
- identifying and sharing innovation and practice through publishing documents detailing examples of projects and programmes and highlighting lessons learned
- developing partnerships with key players in the housing and regeneration sector to ensure that our activities meet their needs and support their work

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