Community schools: Working in partnership to support children, young people and families

Believe in children

Barnardo’s Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Barnardo’s Northern Ireland (NI) began working in schools in Northern Ireland during the late 1990s to address educational underachievement in disadvantaged communities and the impact of poverty. Currently located in more than 60 schools, our services have evolved from helping parents to be more actively involved in their children’s education to delivering a broad range of support services that meet the needs of children, young people, families and the wider community.

These school-based services include early intervention programmes, parenting and family support, restorative practices, social and emotional learning, counselling, and an early years literacy programme. Working with individual schools and school clusters, Barnardo’s NI has been promoting progress towards the implementation of a full-service community school model. Our practice in schools is evidence-based and informed by various international prevention and early intervention models.

About this briefing

Early research highlighted the benefits to children and young people of delivering quality education alongside the provision of health and social services in schools (Dryfoos, 1994). Full-service and community school models have been developing and evolving since then at a local, national and international level.

There are now an estimated 27,000 institutions adopting the approach worldwide (CAS, 2011), including in the UK where various services are being increasingly integrated into school settings across the four nations.

In Northern Ireland a more integrated approach to service delivery is also evident in the Families Matter Strategy and the new structures for planning and commissioning of children’s services through the Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnership. In today’s challenging economic climate there is increasing emphasis on the need to explore other methods of service delivery and for collaboration and partnership working across sectors (NIE, 2012).

This briefing paper highlights how the provision of universal and targeted services in a community school model can play a key role in delivering the NI Executive’s vision of joined-up working. In doing so it outlines the significant health, educational and social benefits for children and families, particularly in disadvantaged areas. The paper also discusses how work already underway in schools in Northern Ireland can be built on to create fully developed community schools.

What is a community school?

Varying terminology has been applied to programmes which extend the role and capacity of the school and many have their roots in full-service and community school initiatives developed in the US. Community schools essentially differ from traditional schools in that they: work not as isolated educational institutions, but as part of a network of other schools and community agencies supporting each other and pooling their resources in a sustained effort’ (Dyson and Raffo, 2007). As well as focusing on academic achievements, they increase access to critical services by bridging schools, family and community (CAS, 2011). There is no single model, however provision typically includes:

- on-site support from a community school team or community school director to co-plan and work in partnership with school leaders and teachers
- activities inside and outside traditional school hours aimed at raising educational achievement
- extended school/teaching hours
- targeted health and other support services for children, young people and families
- family and parenting support, including opportunities for lifelong learning and personal development
- community access to school facilities, with accommodation used flexibly to meet local need, including in the evenings, at weekends and during school holidays
- community engagement to plan and foster economic development.

1 For example, the Tullycarnet Family Project has been based in Tullycarnet Primary School for 15 years and works with children, parents and the wider community to improve outcomes for families living in that area.
2 These include the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) and Elev8 Community School Programme in the United States, ‘Enhanced Schools’ in the Netherlands and a number of growing partnerships with Academy schools in England.
3 DHSSPS (2007) Families Matter: Supporting Families in Northern Ireland. Good examples of multi-agency and integrated working highlighted in the Strategy include the full service school model.
4 ‘Full-service’ is a widely used term; others include ‘broad schools’ (Netherlands); ‘all day schools’ (Germany); ‘community schools’ (US/Scotland/Wales); ‘extended schools/services’ (England and NI).
Children’s Aid Society
The Children’s Aid Society (CAS) community schools were first established in 1992 in partnership with the New York City Department of Education. Now operating in more than 20 schools across New York, they offer comprehensive, co-ordinated services combined with a well supported strategic partnership. As part of this, CAS runs five school-based health centres and a centrally located health services hub to provide comprehensive primary care for pupils.

With a key facilitating role (Technical Assistance), the CAS National Center for Community Schools also helps other US cities and countries to adapt the model to fit the needs of specific communities. To date it has facilitated the development of over 15,000 community school adaptations nationally and internationally. Since we first visited CAS in 2005, Barnardo’s NI has been applying what it has learnt there to the programmes we design and implement in schools across Northern Ireland.

Policy Context

International: In the US, school-community partnerships are a key vehicle for increasing student success and strengthening families and communities. Several school-community partnership models have also been developed in Australia around schools as community hubs, community learning centres and centres of learning excellence (Simons, 2011). In Europe, community schools in the Netherlands link education to parenting support services, childcare, extended education time, and health centres.

United Kingdom: Policy has been developing across the UK in relation to extended, full-service and community schools. For example, in England, extended schools have been linked to the high level outcomes in the DE policy ‘Every Child Matters’ (2003) and the DfES/DH Healthy Schools Programme. Established in 2009, the International Centre of Excellence for Community Schools (ICECS) has played a pivotal role in extended schools/services growth in England, also introducing a set of international quality standards.

Northern Ireland: The vision of Northern Ireland’s sustainable schools policy is an: ‘estate of educationally sustainable schools planned on an area basis, with focus on sharing and collaboration’ (DE, 2009). Extended schools policy and other key DE strategies including ‘Every School a Good School – A Policy for School Improvement’ (2009) and ‘Count, read: succeed – A Strategy to Improve Outcomes in Literacy and Numeracy’ (2011) are also setting out a clear pathway towards sustainable and shared schools.

Although some progress has been made, the promotion and development of full-service community schools in NI has been largely fragmented. Provision currently depends on the initiative of individual schools and through accessing multiple funding streams. Northern Ireland fundamentally differs from community schools in other countries which have a facilitating and co-ordinating role in engaging external agencies to provide services tailored to the challenges faced by individual schools in their communities.

Benefits of a community school approach

Children are ready to learn
Outside school, many children are coping with challenges such as a chaotic family life, caring responsibilities, parental mental ill-health and/or substance misuse, and poverty. One in ten UK children aged 5 to 16 years have been shown to experience a clinically diagnosable mental disorder (Green et al., 2005), which is around three children in every class.

Left untreated, children’s social, emotional and other health problems may act as barriers to learning (Goleman, 1996; Barnardo’s NI, 2012). If wrap-around support services are quickly accessible on school sites then health inequalities and previously unmet health needs can be tackled. Children and young people receive the vital help they need and arrive in class ready to learn.

5 See Coalition for Community Schools www.communityschools.org
6 See http://www.youthpolicy.nl/youthpolicy/Factsheets/community%20schools.pdf
8 School-based health centres and mental health clinics are particularly embedded in the US model. A comprehensive multi-agency approach to service delivery translates into holistic care for each pupil (CAS, 2011).
Schools are supported
Schools are generally not equipped to provide all the requisite support for children who are struggling to achieve in school. Educators cannot and should not be expected to deal with all the needs children might have. In community schools, agencies with expertise in early years, child development, mental and physical health and parenting support provide essential services, leaving teachers free to teach.

Families are engaged
Family engagement is systemic, integrated and sustained within a community school approach, continuing from birth through to young adulthood. By locating early intervention and childhood programmes within school, parents become better equipped to understand their child’s development and support their learning.

School estates are community hubs
While access has been increasing, school estates are traditionally underused in Northern Ireland and the need to take steps to enhance community provision has been recognised (DE, 2012). A fully developed community school model would maximise use of the school estate and unlock the potential of valuable time before and after school, in the evenings, at weekends and during holidays.

Resources are aligned
Community schools bring together resources in one location to target need and promote integration. Delivering a range of universal and targeted services alongside the core teaching team is effective, preventative and cost effective.

Are community schools effective?
Available evidence\(^9\) suggests community schools improve educational attainment, family engagement with schools, children’s learning, school effectiveness and community vitality (CAS, 2011; Dryfoos et al, 2005; Blank et al, 2003). Research and evaluations of CAS community schools conducted in the US over a 19-year period\(^10\) found positive outcomes in a number of areas, including:

- increased academic achievement
- reduction in special education referrals
- improved mental and physical health
- improved social and emotional development
- increased parental involvement and community engagement
- benefits from early childhood education, such as improved school readiness
- busier and happier school climate
- improved teacher attendance.

This is based on a community school model where comprehensive, co-ordinated services are combined with a well supported strategic partnership, good school leadership, and a shared aspiration for and focus on children’s educational achievement. Community schools and also full-service/extended schools are particularly valuable in disadvantaged communities because parental involvement is important for the educational development of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Heers et al, 2011; Carpenter et al, 2010; Cummings et al, 2007). In almost all cases where extended schools are serving disadvantaged communities effectively in Northern Ireland, significant improvements are evident in the educational outcomes and the personal and social wellbeing of pupils (ETI, 2010).

Social return on investment
While information is limited about the social return on investment from a community school model, there is evidence relating to some of its individual components and programmes, for example:

- By extending the school day, you can increase a child’s learning potential by 30 per cent at only 10 per cent of the cost of a typical school day (TASC, 2011).
- The long term savings to society by providing specialist counselling in primary schools is estimated to be in the region of £3 for every £1 invested\(^11\) (Barclays Wealth/ New Philanthropy Capital (NPC), 2011).
- Early intervention programmes with parents and children can generate significant financial savings and reduce lifetime inequality. One long-term study estimates a £7 return for every £1 invested in the early years of a child’s life (Schweinhart et al, 2005). Society benefits in the long term through an increase in skilled workers, and a reduction in crime and poverty (Allen, 2011; Scottish Government, 2010; Sinclair, 2007; Schweinhart et al, 2005; Heckman and Masterov, 2004).

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\(^9\) Causal studies investigating the effectiveness of community schools are generally limited. More longitudinal research is required as causal effects are most likely to be visible in the long run (Heers et al, 2011; Cummings et al, 2007).

\(^10\) Independent evaluations conducted by Fordham University, the Education Development Center, ActKnowledge, the Albert Einstein College of Medicine and others (CAS, 2011).

\(^11\) Based on NPC calculations using figures from The Place2Be (2010) Cost-effective positive outcomes for children and families: An economic analysis of The Place2Be’s integrated school-based services. Place2Be: London.
Northern Ireland – Good Practice

**Barnardo’s NI**

**Family Connections** – this project works in partnership with local schools, services and families in Newtownabbey to provide extended learning opportunities, integrated health and mental health services, parent support and community capacity building.

**Jigsaw** – operating across schools in the Ballymena area, the Jigsaw service provides support for parents in relation to their children’s education. The support can also relate to other issues such as health, emotional wellbeing, substance misuse or parenting skills.

**Schools Programme** – this project serves the education, health and wellbeing needs of children, young people and families in the Greater Falls and Upper Springfield Extended Schools Clusters. It also includes work in schools within the Full-Service Community Network (FSCN) and in the Girls and Boys Model Secondary Schools.

**Tullycarnet Family Project** – located in a whole wing of Tullycarnet Primary school, the project works in partnership with the school, parents, children and various statutory, voluntary and community agencies to deliver learning support activities, health and wellbeing programmes and family support. Local women also participate in personal development courses and vocational training (Barnardo’s NI, 2008).

**Prevention/Early Intervention programmes** are a key component of Barnardo’s NI work in schools and include early years literacy (Ready to Learn), social and emotional learning (PATHS), self esteem/resilience building (Pyramid Plus), counselling (Time4Me12) and parenting programmes (Incredible Years13).

**Girls and Boys Model Secondary Schools**

A full-service schools programme has operated in the Girls Model and Boys Model secondary schools in Belfast since 2007. The schools are supported to work with voluntary and statutory agencies and neighbouring communities to offer a wide variety of support services to students, their families and the wider community.

**Full-Service Community Network (FSCN)**

Through integrated, collaborative working across a range of statutory and voluntary agencies and community groups, the FSCN offers services to tackle disadvantage and raise educational attainment in deprived communities. Operating in the areas served by the West Belfast Partnership Board and the Upper Springfield Development Trust since 2009, the Network has been positively evaluated in terms of its impact on local communities, particularly in relation to children’s health, wellbeing and learning (CCMS, 2011).

**Northern Ireland: Community schools for the future**

Children and families living in disadvantaged areas require a targeted and strategic approach to the challenges they face. Current budget pressures suggest there is a need to conduct a strategic, evidence-based review of what is efficient and effective in the delivery of child and family services (Talbot, 2010). This would present an opportunity for subsequent investment in collaborative prevention and early intervention models such as community schools. A community school approach would also bring together in one location the partnerships and critical resources that children and families need, similar to the universal model envisaged in the Families Matter Strategy. It is also timely to rethink the role of schools in Northern Ireland given the increasing number being rationalised and coming together on one site.

Drawing on the quality standard model successfully developed and implemented in the US by the Children’s Aid Society (CAS, 2011), four inter-related components are the essential building blocks needed for an effective full-service community school infrastructure in Northern Ireland:

**Comprehensiveness**

Co-ordinated partnerships respond to carefully identified and targeted need. They acknowledge the necessity of providing services to support the physical, emotional, social and cognitive health of children as a strategy to improve young people’s learning and development in school.

**Collaboration**

As part of school reform all stakeholders share leadership and meaningful engagement. This includes families and communities, in order to foster a sense of shared responsibility.

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Coherence
High quality programmes and services are secured, seamlessly integrated and effectively co-ordinated by a community school co-ordinator/lead agency to meet the needs of children in the school. Reducing the management burden on educators, this community school team is a partner rather than a tenant in the school.

Commitment
Sustained long-term partnership shares a clear vision and accountability for results. A high degree of commitment to joined-up working and planning across a range of agencies and organisations is essential. A long-term change strategy is required rather than a one-off, or time-limited project.

'We are joined at the hip. We work together to make sure every student gets what they need. She works on the social supports and I work on the instruction and together, we make it work.'

A community schools strategy should promote and incentivise formal, collaborative partnerships between schools and relevant service providers, led by a community school coordinator/lead agency.

The NI Executive should support the delivery of integrated, early interventions in school settings and undertake a strategic review of what is effective, particularly in communities where there is disproportionate disadvantage.

References

Recommendations
- The NI Executive should build on extended and full-service school initiatives and further maximise use of the school estate in Northern Ireland by developing a collaborative, cross-departmentally funded community schools strategy.
- A community schools strategy should promote sustainable investment and innovative partnership working across sectors. All agencies should not only be required to demonstrate output, but also return on investment in outcomes for children.

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14 A principal describes the experience of working with a community school co-ordinator http://www.communityschools.org/resources/part_onewhat_a_community_school_looks_like.aspx