A Strategy in Raising Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy

Barnardo’s Northern Ireland Response

November 2008
1) Barnardo’s is the largest voluntary children’s organisation in NI we work with over 9,000 children and their families every year and have worked with children and families here for more than 100 years. We provide a wide range of services including family support and child protection, juvenile justice services, services for disabled children and young people in care and leaving care.

2) Barnardo’s has a significant base of work with schools. We work with a total of 67 schools and in every education and library board area. We provide a broad range of services from co-ordinating extended schools clusters, parenting and family support, counselling services to support for children with autism. In producing this response we have also consulted with a number of these schools on their views of the Strategy.

3) Barnardo’s welcomes the publication of this strategy and regards the improvement of literacy and numeracy as an essential and key element in improving educational attainments and consequently long term disadvantage and poverty. We currently are and will continue to work with schools on supporting parents and children in improving educational attainment levels.

4) There is much in the current strategy that we would welcome and in particular the focus on reading recovery and the clear classroom and class teacher support strategy. We do not intend to go through and welcome every aspect of the Strategy but rather will focus on those elements which we believe need to be further addressed or included within it.

5) Barnardo’s are particularly concerned that despite a clear recognition within the Strategy of the crucial role of parents in improving literacy and numeracy there is no detailed action plan for how they are to be further involved or supported to help with their children’s education. Parental involvement in schools has been identified as a crucial factor in educational attainment. There are a number of significant studies which have underscored the importance of parental involvement to educational
success. The approach outlined in section 6 of the Strategy with regards to parents does not give the same level of detailed planning and direction as to those given for the classroom based strategies. Yet it is clear that without such involvement there is unlikely to be a significant level of success.

Queens University Belfast have recently undertaken research for Barnardo’s on this issue and reviewed both the literature and consulted with children and young people on what would assist them to improve their educational outcomes. There was clear evidence that involving parents improved outcomes and when the children were asked they identified supporting their parents to get involved and help them in school was crucial. In other words schools need to involve parents in a way that will build both their capacity and capabilities to assist their children. This requires a coherent strategy and action plan and unfortunately this is not currently contained within the Strategy.

We recognise the role of the Extended Schools programme in supporting parental involvement but unfortunately that has been subject to a reduction in funding. We believe that it is essential that schools are provided with the resources and support to enable them to engage with parents and include them as an integral element of improving literacy and numeracy.

6) Barnardo’s is also concerned that the Strategy does not specifically address the needs of those particular interest groups of children who face additional barriers and difficulties. For example, children who have been in the care system, young people with speech and language difficulties and young people with challenging behaviour.

7) Early Years
Research has clearly demonstrated that a focus on early years development, speech and language and early interaction and introduction with books are key to developing good literacy and numeracy skills at school age. The Strategy should seek to link further with early years services and developments and recognise that developing literacy and numeracy skills does not begin at school age. It requires access to a quality early years experience that builds early skills that don’t just ensure children have a good basis for literacy and numeracy but are generally school ready.
8) A number of the schools that Barnardo’s has worked with have raised the issue of current class sizes. In particular given that current demography means falling numbers in schools and that the Strategy is clearly class room and class teacher focused then reducing the number of children per class would allow for greater teacher attention and a more individual focus. In particular, where children had initial literacy and numeracy difficulties it would allow for these to be identified early and early remedial action taken.

9) Extended Schools – Barnardo’s works with a number of schools under the Extended Schools programme and believes this has been invaluable in addressing the difficulties experienced by many children and young people in disadvantaged areas. We have been very concerned at the reduction in Extended School Funding and would urge the Department to re-consider this particularly in the light of a focus on improving educational attainment for the most disadvantaged children.

10) We would also recommend that the Department considers international best practice in this area. We are aware of the impact of both early years programmes like Incredible Years and the Wizz for Words programme which has been running in the South of Ireland.

11) Overall while Barnardo’s believes there is much to be welcomed in the Strategy if we are to be really effective in improving literacy and numeracy then it is vital that as much attention is given to parental involvement and support as to classroom based approaches and to addressing the broader aspects of disadvantage.

12) If you require further information or would like to discuss this response please contact:

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