

Pupil Premium

'The Government believes that the Pupil Premium, funding which is additional to main school funding, is the best way to address the current inequalities by ensuring that funding to tackle disadvantage reaches the pupils who need it most.' Department of Education (1/04/2011)

The Pupil Premium (PP) seems to be one of the few growth areas that schools have presently for attempting to address the inequalities in English education. This was discussed at the very well attended Dudley Association of Governing Bodies (DAGB) Area meeting 22/03/2011.

The international benchmark for this, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) finds UK income inequality to be the seventh highest in the OECD and most importantly the change in the poverty rates currently is above the OECD average.

One of the key methods for readjusting this imbalance is via education. As can be seen recently in the local news the West Midlands is an area of the greatest educational deprivation having the highest numbers lacking any educational qualifications at all! BBC News 22/07/2011 – *"West Midlands 'worst' for educational qualifications."*

Free School Meals (FSM) is the crude method to assess this deprivation that is being used to obtain £430 per annum for each child claiming FSM. It is purely an economic indicator based on just one income variable and does not take into account that some communities are more than financially deprived where the whole ethos of education and qualifications is remote. DAGB members discussed this method of economic deprivation at the last Dudley Schools Forum 07/06/2011.

However the FSM funding stream is what we have at the moment.

If we think that this a way forward “How can we utilize FSM to maximum effect?”

The FSM figures in Dudley for the 99 schools in the Dudley borough that the council’s school catering team provides meals for:(seven schools have their own catering)

2009/10-6584 entitled free meals per day(take up was 5,207)

2010/11-7,142 “ “ “ “ “ (take up was 5354)

2011/12-6400 “ “ “ “ “ (take up was 4982)

As school budgets are decimated this deduction could be reduced if more pupils took up their entitlement to FSM.

This will of course vary with each school but it is thought that in some instances as much as 35% are eligible as against a 6% take up which equates to a substantial amount of funding in reducing the deficit in school provision. If you applied this to just one instance this could increase a school’s annual Pupil Premium income almost six times.

Overall the School Food Trust reckon that nationally only 80% of those entitled to register do. This is of course far higher in some areas and some schools because of the current economic climate’s fluctuating employment patterns (redundancies, short time, pay cuts), the complexity of claiming, the lack of knowledge of such entitlement, the outmoded stigma attachment and a general reluctance to filling in forms.

As the ever changing picture emerges in narrowing the attainment gap there seems to be various messages flying about as the data juggernaut sustains the formation of the impending super league tables.

The danger is that there may be a distinct tendency to dictate where schools will focus their efforts in the existing status quo and to reinforce the gap as opposed to narrowing it as the scramble up and down the league tables continues.

Pupil Premiums and more sophisticated Accountability Systems which will hold schools to account over a wider range of criteria rather than just GCSEs are a way of resolving this contradiction.

Ofsted accountability ranking will be looking at what Governors are doing for our most vulnerable children and the Pupil Premium will have to be used specifically for FSM entitled children thus preventing funds being diverted towards pupils more likely to boost a school's ranking in the league tables. Let hope that these two variables can coincide in a way so as to benefit everyone.

To facilitate the take up of the Pupil Premium a paper/online application form could be devised as soon as possible, urging parents to claim and most importantly explaining the rationale behind such a claim for our children and their futures.

Jim Conway Ridgewood High School

(The disparity between Free School Meals eligibility and take-up has been referred to local MPs in the hope that we may be able to maximize the availability of the Pupil Premium to our schools – Ed)