

Joint Educational Select Committee and Work and Pensions Select Committee inquiry into the foundation years and the government's life chances strategy

Response from the Association of School and College Leaders

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents more than 18,500 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.

The ongoing challenge of child poverty

- 2 The latest child poverty statistics are stark. Statistics released in June 2015¹ revealed the extent of the ongoing problem:
 - a 3.7 million children were living in poverty in the UK in 2013-14. This is 28 per cent of children, or nine in a classroom of 30.
 - b Child poverty reduced dramatically between 1998/9-2011/12, when 1.1 million children were lifted out of poverty. Since 2010, child poverty figures have flat-lined. The number of children in absolute poverty has increased by 0.5 million since 2010.
 - c The Institute for Fiscal Studies has projected that the number of children in relative poverty will rise from 3.6m to 4.3 million by 2020.
 - d Work does not provide a guaranteed route out of poverty in the UK. Two-thirds (64 per cent) of children growing up in poverty live in a family where at least one member works.
 - e Child poverty blights childhoods. Growing up in poverty means being cold, going hungry, and not being able to join in activities with friends.
 - f Child poverty impacts education, and has long-lasting effects on people's life chances. By GCSE, there is a 28 per cent gap between children receiving free school meals and their wealthier peers in terms of the number achieving at least 5 A*-C GCSE grades.
- 3 It is essential that addressing child poverty continues to be at the front of policy makers' minds, and we welcome the contribution this inquiry could make to that end.

The importance of an appropriate measure of child poverty

- 4 ASCL urges the inquiry to reject any definition of child poverty that serves to minimise the key measure of family income or to obfuscate the extent of the problem. The government's life chances strategy, announced by Iain Duncan Smith in July 2015, signalled its intention to introduce legislation to establish a new measure of child poverty, moving away from the

¹ [Households below average income: 1994/1995 to 2013/2014](#), Department for Work and Pensions, June 2015

current '60% of median income' definition towards a definition based on measures such as:

- a the proportion of children living in workless households
 - b the educational attainment of all pupils and the most disadvantaged pupils at age 16
 - c indicators of family breakdown, debt and addiction.
- 5 While such factors can be *causes* or *consequences* of child poverty, they cannot in themselves constitute a *measure* of poverty. It is essential that we retain a measure of child poverty which
- a is a genuine measure
 - b enables us to make meaningful comparisons with previous years, in order to gauge progress.
- 6 We therefore urge the select committees to add their weight to calls to ensure we retain a meaningful measure of child poverty.

The role education can play in tackling child poverty

- 7 ASCL welcomes the inquiry's desire to better understand the relationship between early education, poverty and young people's life chances. School and college leaders are dedicated to doing all they can to improve the life chances of every young person in their care, and to narrowing the gap between students from more and less advantaged backgrounds.
- 8 A young person's background has a major impact on their chances of success in education and beyond. This impact includes the following²:
- a Children from lower-income families spend shorter periods of time in pre-school education, which has a knock-on effect on later academic attainment.
 - b Children attending primary schools where 35 per cent or more pupils are entitled to free school meals are less than half as likely as those attending more affluent schools to reach expected literacy standards at age 11.
 - c Children growing up in poverty are less likely to stay on in education and more likely to leave early without qualifications.
 - d Young people from the highest social class groups are three times more likely to enter university as those from the lowest social groups.
- 9 ASCL welcomes the government's recognition of these challenges, and the provision of the pupil premium fund to help schools to provide targeted, evidence-informed support for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- 10 However, we would urge the committees to consider the negative impact that the current crisis in school funding is having on all pupils, and particularly on those from disadvantaged backgrounds. ASCL has proposed a fairer school funding formula³ which, we believe, would help to address this issue. This takes a needs-led approach, with additional weighting for schools and settings with high levels of deprivation, low prior attainment and/or high proportions of children whose first language is not English. We hope that the committees will support this proposal in order to help schools tackle the educational consequences of child poverty as robustly as they can.
- 11 There are many studies across the fields of neuroscience, developmental psychology and economics which highlight the importance of the early years in countering socio-economic

² For more detail see Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [The cost of child poverty for individuals and society](#), 2008 and Ofsted, [The impact of early education as a strategy in countering socio-economic disadvantage](#), 2013

³ See <http://www.ascl.org.uk/help-and-advice/ascl-policy-papers/ascl-policy-education-funding.html>

disadvantage. This would suggest that there should be a strong policy focus on encouraging the development of high quality early education, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- 12 It is clear, however, that the multiple challenges of child poverty cannot be addressed only through education. Poverty is a multi-faceted problem⁴, and needs to be addressed through coordinated, multi-agency, approaches.

Conclusion

- 13 ASCL welcomes the joint select committees' inquiry into this hugely important issue, and would be delighted to work with the committees on any proposals emerging as a result of the inquiry. We would urge the inquiry to encourage policy makers to
- a retain a measure of child poverty which is a genuine measure, and which enables meaningful comparisons with previous years
 - b support ASCL and other organisations' call for a fairer school funding formula, which would help schools in their desire to tackle the educational issues associated with child poverty
 - c encourage policy makers to focus on the potential of high quality early education to tackle poverty and disadvantage
 - d recognise that child poverty is complex and multi-faceted, and needs to be addressed through joined-up public policy approaches.
- 14 I hope that this is of value to your consultation. ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

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⁴ See, for example, the Sutton Trust's report on the complex relationship between poverty and secure parental attachment, [Baby Bonds](#).