

## **Making a Difference in Education**

The attainment of Scotland's young people in education has been the focus of a lot of political debate recently. Rightly there is a focus on early years in the National Attainment Framework through the Curriculum for Excellence and Getting It Right For Every Child. It was in that context that I was delighted to hear about an approach focussing on secondary school pupils that has been having great success in improving attendance and attainment for those involved.

The approach is being used by Midlothian Council's Mediation Service which is a part of the Community Safety and Justice Partnership. Since 2015 the service has been helping to improve young people's attendance at school using mediators employed by the council. The approach involves mediation between the young people, their families, and the school to find solutions that can help improve attendance. To date 70 referrals have been made to the service with several very successful outcomes for all those involved.

The object of the mediations is to engage, in the first instance with the young person, to explore how attendance, attitude and engagement at school might be improved. In doing so barriers to attendance will be examined and the curriculum/courses taken will be a key part of conversations. The mediation service will also engage with families and the school and one of the key features of the scheme is that the mediators are independent and regarded as so by the young people involved. The outcomes of the mediations form a contract for all involved and are likely to include attendance at school, behaviours in the school and the community, addressing barriers to attendance and the curriculum/course.

The results of the mediations are encouraging. In addition to the items referred to in the contracts other issues have been identified through the process which have included identification of dyslexia, engagement with parents who themselves did not attend school, a reduction in offending and through tailored curriculums, a direct route into employment, and that's just the direct impacts identified. For me what seemed very powerful is the potential for such interventions to have wider impacts such as breaking the cycle of low attainment, reducing homelessness, helping to build positive relationships, and being included.

A number of examples were given of individual stories but one particularly struck me as it seemed a solution that fitted the needs of everyone involved. A 13-year-old with a 46% attendance rate, a record of exclusions and an involvement in crime made a significant turnaround. He now has an attendance rate of 73.5%, is engaged at school, has an enhanced curriculum, and no further offences have been committed. The curriculum is now solely focussed on maths and English (a minimum for everyone) and catering. The catering has involved work placements from which employment is expected to follow.

The responses of the young people and families have been very positive, examples include:

"The mediator has kept me out of trouble, changed my subjects and has really helped me."

## **Engaging Positively with Conflict**

“Understanding the way forward for me and my son has been brilliant.”

Having previously attended presentations highlighting the need to have a joined-up approach it was heartening to see that Children and Families, Social Work, Schools, GP’s, the Police, and other agencies are all involved in making referrals to the service. Like other areas where mediation has been used, it seems the ability of the mediators to sit between schools, parents, and the young people as someone to support that conversation, ensuring that everyone knows they are being listened to is very important. Once that trust has been gained, being able to explore the ‘what if this succeeds’ and ‘what if it doesn’t’ questions in a safe space also seem to be very important.

For councils, it seems that given the outcomes investment in such services makes economic sense, but for me what makes the service compelling is the potential to change lives. Even if we get education “right” for young people in the early years there will still need to be ways of getting people back on track once they reach secondary school.

In taking on this work the Mediation Service has been innovative in training volunteer mediators from other council department to take on the work around community mediations in their working time. The mediators felt it was having a positive impact on their work in their own departments too with no shortage of opportunities to use their listening and other conflict resolution skills.