

A Guide to Networks:

**A Strategic Approach to
Educational Disadvantage**

Introduction

A Guide to Networks is a resource that has been developed by the Combat Poverty Agency. It is based on the Agency's experience of developing the Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage and draws on the work of the four networks involved in this programme. It aims to offer an insight into the value of networks as a means of developing locally based inter-agency approaches to educational disadvantage. In doing so, it highlights steps taken by the four networks involved in the Demonstration Programme to initiate and develop these structures in their respective areas and highlights issues that may be faced by others interested in developing this approach.

The guide presents a brief background and introduction to the Demonstration Programme and covers key topics relevant to the development of local networks:

- it offers a definition of networks;
- it offers a rationale for the development of networks;
- it explains a possible process for the development of networks;
- it highlights core principles necessary for the effective development of networks;
- it presents an account of some of the core issues emerging from the experience of developing networks in the Combat Poverty Agency's Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage.
- It is anticipated that the guide will be of relevance to all who are seeking to understand and/or develop area-based integrated approaches to educational disadvantage.

The Combat Poverty Agency and Educational Disadvantage

The Combat Poverty Agency is a state agency working for the prevention and elimination of poverty and social exclusion. Its function is to research the causes and extent of poverty in Ireland, to raise public awareness on the issue, to provide independent expertise and advice to policy makers on how to tackle poverty and, finally, to support innovative community development and anti-poverty initiatives.

Educational disadvantage has been a priority issue for the Combat Poverty Agency for a number of years and has been addressed by the Agency in successive strategic plans. This interest in educational disadvantage has evolved from growing concern nationally with the issue of early school leaving and mounting evidence of the relationship between the lack of educational attainment and poverty.

Educational disadvantage is a complex issue. It refers to a situation whereby individuals in society derive less benefit from the education system than their peers. It is manifested in many ways, most notably in poor levels of participation and achievement in the formal education system. Those who experience educational disadvantage tend to leave the formal education system with few or no qualifications. This puts them at a disadvantage in the labour market, curtails their personal and social development, and puts them at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

A substantial number of initiatives have been developed in the last two decades to address the problem of educational disadvantage in Ireland. These initiatives have involved the creation of alternative informal educational programmes and the allocation of additional resources where problems of inequality and disadvantage exist, in particular to schools located in areas of considerable socio-economic disadvantage.

Examples of resource-based responses to educational disadvantage within the formal education system include, among others:

- the Disadvantaged Area Schools Scheme;
- the Early Start Programme;
- the Breaking the Cycle Initiative;
- the Giving Children An Even Break By Tackling Disadvantage Programme.

Increasingly, however, there has been a recognition of the multi-dimensional nature of educational disadvantage and an acknowledgement that educational disadvantage is rooted in the complex interaction of factors at home, in school and in the community. This enhanced understanding of the problem has recognised the need to address educational disadvantage through the development of integrated approaches involving the home, school, community and other relevant services.

Within the context of young people experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, educational disadvantage, this emphasis on integrated approaches makes sense. Given the complex range of interconnected issues in the lives of children, their families and their communities, and in the structure and content of the school system that contribute to educational disadvantage, an approach of matching complexity is required. Integration provides that approach of matching complexity by incorporating all interests involved in the education and welfare of young people in collaborative efforts to address the problem.

Initiatives, such as the Home School Community Liaison Scheme, the 8-15 Early School Leaver Initiative and the Stay in School Retention Initiative are programmes under the auspices of the Department of Education and Science in Ireland that reflect this recognition of the need for integrated responses to educational disadvantage.

This document is based on a model of integration developed under the Combat Poverty Agency's pilot Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage, which focused on the development of local area-based 'networks' as a means of developing locally appropriate integrated approaches to educational disadvantage.

The Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage

The Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage was established by the Combat Poverty Agency in 1996 with the dual purpose of:

- establishing and supporting locally-based networks to develop integrated analysis and responses to educational disadvantage;
- developing structures that have the capacity to influence policy and practice at national level drawing from the local experience.

The programme involved three strands:

- a local structure in which four networks¹ were supported to develop integrated programmes of work to tackle educational disadvantage that were identified, designed and delivered by their constituent members;
- a policy strand in which lessons from the programme experience were disseminated through meetings, seminars, workshops, submissions and policy papers to contribute to the development of policy and practice;
- an evaluation strand which was undertaken by the Children's Research Centre of Trinity College, Dublin.

The pilot programme concluded in December 2000.

¹ See next section for details.

The experience of the Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage has shown that there is a role for local networks in stimulating and developing integrated responses to educational disadvantage. The four networks involved in the programme facilitated and co-ordinated personnel from a variety of formal and informal educational sectors to come together to research, plan and develop collaborative actions. They facilitated members to enhance their understanding of the nature and causes of educational disadvantage and enabled them to break down the isolation they felt in addressing educational disadvantage.

Networks of the Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage

As noted above, four networks were supported under the Combat Poverty Agency Demonstration Programme. These were:

Tralee Education Network (TEN), Co. Kerry;

Network for Education Support Tuam Area (NESTA), Co. Galway;

Drogheda Youth Educational Network (DYEN), Co. Louth;

Killinarden Education Network (KEN), West Tallaght, Co. Dublin.

The creation of these networks was based on local understanding and experience of what would be a 'workable' area for this type of work approach. Each of the networks was located in the catchment area of a local area-based Partnership company and in an area with a history of collaborative working. The areas are quite different in terms of their size, their socio-economic characteristics and their rural/urban make-up.

Membership of the networks, though varying with local situation, typically included representatives from the following:

- Schools – both primary and post primary;
- Parents;
- Training centres;
- Youth and community services;
- Area-based Partnership companies;
- Statutory services, such as local Health Boards, Gardaí, Probation Services;
- Special Projects – Dept. of Justice Youth Diversion Projects, 8 – 15 ESLI, Youthstart, etc.
- Special interest groups, e.g. related to the Travelling Community, Disability, etc.

Each of the networks chose to focus on educational disadvantage among the compulsory school-going age groups within their respective areas. Based on this focus, each of the four networks developed integrated programmes of work to tackle educational disadvantage in their respective areas.

WHAT ARE NETWORKS?

Networks are:

- Structures or groups that facilitate the inclusion and participation of all interests related to a particular issue in efforts to address that issue.
- Structures that aim to enhance and develop working relationships between those interests.
- A catalyst for information sharing and influencing strategy among those interest groups and for collaborative action.

In the case of Networks to support integrated responses to Educational Disadvantage, they are:

Structures that facilitate the inclusion and participation of all interests related to the education and welfare of young people in efforts to address educational disadvantage in their respective areas.

Structures that aim to enhance and develop working relationships between the home, school and community.

Structures that acknowledge the role of schools in addressing educational disadvantage and simultaneously reinforce the role of other key partners such as parents, youth and community workers, health board employees, etc.

WHY NETWORKS?

Networks facilitate the coming together of relevant interested parties and enable these parties to exchange information, to increase their understanding of one another and of relevant issues, to provide support to one another and to work together on pertinent issues in a supportive and collaborative environment. Networks provide the opportunity for working collectively on issues, which heretofore may have been addressed in an individualised and isolated manner. Their key focus is on facilitating better choices and outcomes for their target group/s.

In the context of educational disadvantage, networks provide a structure that matches the complexity of educational disadvantage and provide the opportunity to address the problem in an interconnected and integrated fashion.

Essentially, networks provide the opportunity to develop a locally based, integrated and strategic approach to addressing educational disadvantage that is based on:

- a shared analysis of the problem at both local and national levels;
- a shared analysis of the resources and capacities to address the problem;
- the identification of priority issues to be addressed locally;
- the development of collaborative strategies to address those issues;
- putting young people at risk of/experiencing educational disadvantage at the heart of responses to enhance educational opportunities and outcomes.

The process is one of developing local solutions to local problems while linking to the broader educational and social policy context as appropriate.

DEVELOPING NETWORKS – HOW?

There is no strict formula for the effective development of networks. The following highlights the steps undertaken by the networks within the Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage:

Formation of a Collaborative Working Group

- Identify key interests to participate in the network. This is an ongoing process; new network members can and do join on a regular basis².
- Secure a commitment among these interest groups to work collaboratively as equal partners to address educational disadvantage in their community.
- Develop a common vision that states what members would like the network to achieve. This common vision is based on a shared analysis of:
 - a) educational disadvantage at both local and national levels;

² When this happens, thorough orientation/induction of new members is critically important.

- b) resources and capacities to address the problem locally;
- priority issues requiring attention and action Explore how network members will make collective decisions and agree network structures, such as the need for a steering committee, representation on the committee, regularity of meetings, roles, etc.

Consultation/Community Assessment

Engage in a process of consultation with network and community members, facilitating them to identify, prioritise and select key issues/themes relating to educational disadvantage locally. This may involve some initial baseline research.

Specifically, find out:

- What's most important to children and families in the area; what do they want and need to succeed in education and life?
- What strengths & resources are already in the community to help young people and families succeed in education and life?
- What isn't working well for young people and families in existing systems – what could be working better?
- What are the desired outcomes for young people and their families?
- What results will network members need to see from their involvement in the network to maintain and increase their commitment to the process?

Arising from the process of consultation, facilitate members to select priority issues that need to be addressed locally.

The process of consultation is also an ongoing one; as the network develops, new issues/themes take on priority and demand increased attention. An effective network should remain flexible to addressing issues as they emerge.

Develop & Implement Collaborative Responses

Arising out of the selection of key themes, facilitate network members to identify targets in relation to each of these themes.

Subsequently, facilitate members to choose the best strategies to achieve desired results.

Specifically, decide:

- Which network members need to be involved in strategies and who will do what?
- What resources are needed for the strategies and which network members will contribute and/or raise these resources?
- How will the network co-ordinate the activities of all members involved?
- How will young people and families be involved in the strategies?
- How will the network monitor progress of the various strategies and outcomes for young people?

Implement strategies

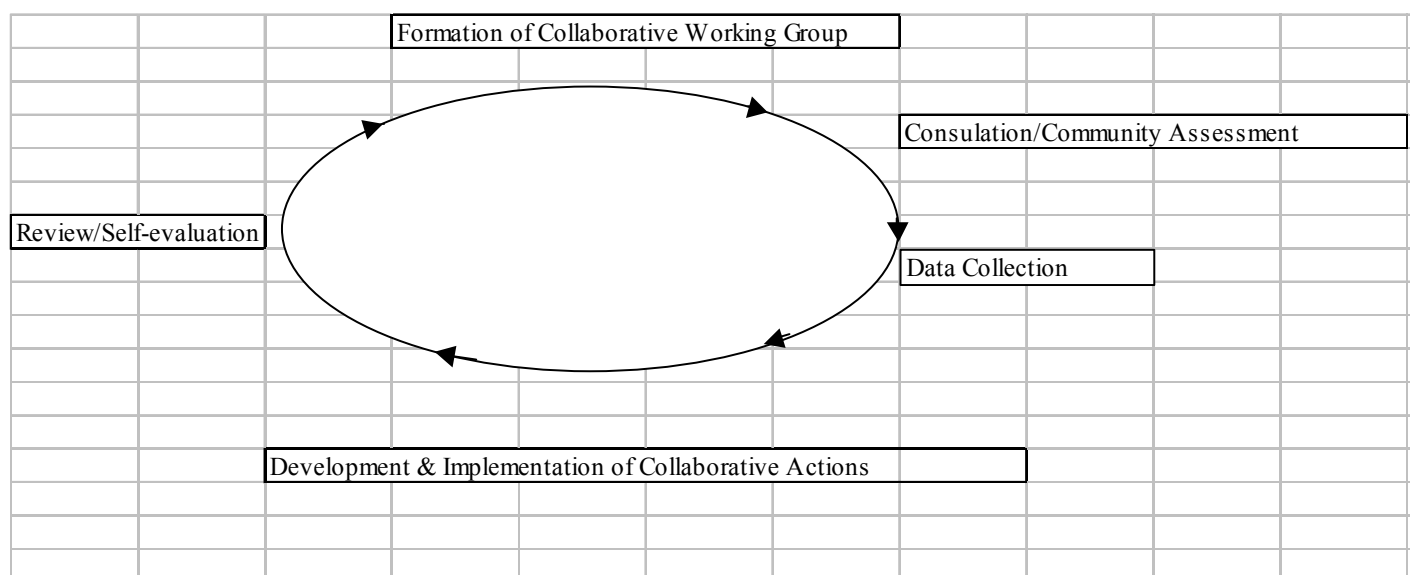
Self-Evaluation

Establish a mechanism that enables network members to undertake periodic reflection on:

- the effectiveness of work undertaken by the network;
- new priorities for the next period;

- strategies to address these new priorities.

The process of developing a network is a cyclical one, involving:



** Employment of a Network Co-ordinator

The experience of the Demonstration Programme has shown that the development of networks cannot really take place without the presence of a full-time worker to lead and facilitate the networking process. While there may be a commitment to networking among members, it is very difficult for them to fulfill that commitment within the constraints of existing personal and work commitments. Therefore, it is important that a full-time network co-ordinator be put in place at the earliest possible stage in a network's development³. This issue is dealt with in greater detail in the later section on Resourcing Networks.

** Meetings

The importance of meetings in the development of networks cannot be overstated. In the context of the Demonstration Programme networks, general network meetings took place on average monthly, while meetings between members took place on an ongoing basis to address issues of priority identified during the consultation phase.

PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE NETWORKING

The following principles are considered central to effective networks:

- Commitment to Common Goals – all network members share a common set of goals and aspirations for the network that are drawn from a desire to improve choices for young people at risk of educational underachievement and work collaboratively to achieve those goals.
- Shared Ownership – all members are equal partners who share ownership of the network and who have equal opportunity to shape its agenda.
- Sustaining Relationships – all network members work to develop and sustain working relationships with other members of the network.
- Shared Responsibility – all members share responsibility for network actions and share accountability for the results of the network's strategies.

³ The development of all four networks involved in the Demonstration Programme progressed very rapidly after a co-ordinator was recruited and in place.

- Respecting other disciplines – those network members operating out of one particular discipline must recognise the validity, potential and limitations of the disciplines of each of the other network members, as well as of their own.
- Openness within organisations to altering policies and procedures, and to redesigning the delivery of their particular service, as a result of lessons learned from interaction with other interests.

RESOURCING NETWORKS

Networking is primarily concerned with the development of new ways of working within existing resources. For example, the annual budget afforded to each of the Demonstration Programme networks was £30,000 for the first two years of operation and £35,000 for the final two years. This sum enabled the networks to employ a co-ordinator and cover administration costs, but little else. This limited programme budget ensured that the networks:

- focused primarily on relationship building and collaborative ways of working;
- did not focus excessively on projects;
- explored ways of working within the existing resources of network membership or acted as a catalyst for network members to draw in additional resources for network priorities.

Networking requires, above all else, a commitment of time and a commitment to dialogue⁴. Members must give of their time to participate in meetings, to share information, to plan and deliver actions and to reflect on progress with other network members.

This investment of time and energy not only results in positive benefits for the network; it also results in benefits:

- for those who are experiencing educational disadvantage in the area;
- for members' work within their own roles and organisations.

In acknowledging the need for members to commit to the process of networking, it is also important to note that a Network Co-ordinator is the central resource required in the development of networks. The role of the co-ordinator, which is independent of all interest groups and all sectors⁵, is critical in:

- creating the conditions for trust to develop between network members of various disciplines and for new ways of collaborative working to develop locally;
- developing and sustaining effective inter-agency relationships;
- stimulating and supporting new initiatives to tackle educational disadvantage which respond to particular needs identified locally;
- channelling lessons from work to other practitioners and policy makers as appropriate.

In making recommendations regarding key characteristics required for such a pivotal role, it is important to highlight that, in spite of the recent proliferation of co-ordination roles across a whole range of disciplines and services, there is no specific co-ordination qualification. The discussion on co-ordinators raises the question as to whether co-ordinating positions should be filled by any particular discipline. The experience of the Demonstration Programme would suggest that the answer is 'no'.

Good communication skills are the core ingredient required by co-ordinators engaged in building and negotiating inter-agency relationships. Good communication is

⁴ The aforementioned importance of meetings is critical in this regard.

⁵ See next section on Organisational Structures.

facilitated by knowledge of different disciplines and their associated practices⁶, by knowledge of the local area and local area culture, by opportunities to network with other people, and by an awareness of the influence that one's own background and ideas can bring to the development of relationships⁷.

Within participating organisations, networking requires the support of senior management. Otherwise organisational involvement in a network may simply rely on the interest and goodwill of individual representatives or workers. Examples of effective networking tend to involve both the commitment of locally based workers and the backing of organisational management. Similarly, networking requires that internal reporting structures be created in participating organisations so that lessons learned from participation in the network are taken on by the organisation as a whole rather than just by the individual/s involved.

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES

Three of the four networks involved in the Demonstration Programme were established as companies limited by guarantee with Boards of Directors, elected annually, responsible for financial, employment and legal matters. The fourth network was not established as a limited company. In this instance, the local area youth service administered the network's financial, employment and legal matters.

There is no strict formula for the organisational structures of networks. Establishing a limited company can make demands on the time of a) network members and b) the network co-ordinator - time that could perhaps be more usefully allocated to the development of the network. However, the establishment of a limited company acts as a clear demonstration of commitment by network members to this way of working. On the other hand, getting a participating organisation within the network to administer the network's affairs avoids time being spent on legal matters and enables all involved in the network to concentrate on its development.

Irrespective of which option one chooses, an essential ingredient of any network is the creation of a network steering committee or support group. This core group consists of representatives from the broad network membership and is responsible for the network's development and direction.

The role of the individual steering group member involves a number of central tasks, such as:

- bringing one's own viewpoint on issues relating to educational disadvantage to the committee;
- taking decisions on behalf of the network;
- acting both as a representative on behalf of one's own particular interest group/sector and on behalf of the network as a whole.

Perhaps one of the most significant issues concerning the organisational structures of a network relates to the employment of a network co-ordinator. As noted in the previous section, the co-ordinator's role is independent of all interest groups and all sectors and yet is responsible for the overall co-ordination of the network. To whom is the co-ordinator responsible therefore?

Essentially, the Coordinator is employed by the network. If the network is a limited company, the Coordinator is ultimately responsible and accountable to the Board of

⁶ In particular the formal education system and community development models in the context of networking to address educational disadvantage.

⁷ For further information, see Cullen (2000).

Directors, but is more likely to take direction from the network steering committee, which acts as the decision making body of the network.

In situations where employment matters are administered by a participating organisation in the network, the employment of a network co-ordinator is potentially a more complicated issue. While the steering committee is responsible for the direction and development of the network, the co-ordinator has a separate employer. It is important to emphasise, therefore, that, though this organisation is the official employer of the co-ordinator, the co-ordinator remains directly responsible to the steering committee. The co-ordinator is employed to co-ordinate the network. S/He does not have any other responsibilities outside of this and this arrangement needs to be documented and agreed by all partners involved in the process.

As a final point relating to organisational structures, networks should build on effective community systems/structures already in existence. The purpose of networking is not to replace or replicate existing structures but to add value to what is already in place. Network members must remain conscious of this at all times.

CHALLENGES TO NETWORKS

The development of networking is a potentially complex process. While many people speak the language of co-operation and co-ordination, in practice co-operation and co-ordination can be substantially more difficult. The following outlines a number of issues that have the potential to act as barriers to the development of networks:

Time – The process of developing a network is slow, particularly in the early stages of development. It takes time to identify and build up an appropriate and effective network membership. The process involves getting in contact with all potential members from formal and informal education sectors to afford them the opportunity to declare their interest in participating in a network. It is important to note that a process of this nature will not succeed in bringing all potential members together, but every effort must be made to ensure that all potential members are informed of the process and have the opportunity to be a part of it.

Similarly, the processes of acquiring information about needs and resources in the area, and of setting up network structures and management capacities are also time-consuming.

Setting network aims and objectives – Network members are drawn from a range of disciplines (formal and non-formal education, health, Gardaí, youth and community, parents) with a variety of personal and organisational agendas. Given the breadth of network membership and the scope of their respective personal and organisational agendas, a challenge facing the network as a whole is to produce a set of realistic and precisely focused set of aims and objectives for their shared work. There is no doubt that educational disadvantage needs to be tackled at a number of levels: pre-school, primary and post-primary, after-school, life-long learning and so forth. Actions designed to tackle the problems at all levels have the capacity to be integrative, but the benefits of such actions may be so long term that they lack the immediacy to sustain network member's commitment to the process of working in an integrative fashion. A clear focus is needed therefore. As noted earlier, each of the networks involved in the Demonstration Programme chose to focus on educational disadvantage among the compulsory school-going age groups within their respective areas.

Balance between 'process' and 'action' – As highlighted above the process of developing a network is slow. This has the potential to frustrate members who have come together to 'do something' about the incidence of educational disadvantage in

their respective area⁸. While there is little doubt that a network must take time for group-building exercises, such as the development of a set of common goals and acquiring information on priority needs and local capacities, it is equally necessary for the network to be involved in action if it is to sustain the interest and commitment of its membership. There is no easy formula for ensuring this balance. It is merely an issue of which both the network steering committee and the network co-ordinator need to remain conscious throughout the process of developing a network.

Organisational backing – Reference has already been made to the importance of organisational backing in the development of networks. The absence of support from senior management for individuals representing an organisation on a network limits the capacity of those individuals to commit fully to the work of the network and limits their capacity to view their involvement in the network as part of their ongoing work.

Networking as a means to an end – While much attention is required to develop the network and enhance its efficiency, network members must always remain conscious that the primary purpose of networking is to address the issue of educational disadvantage and improve the choices for young people experiencing or at risk of experiencing educational underachievement. It is important, therefore, that excessive attention is not given to the development of the network at the expense of meaningfully addressing the needs of the network's target group.

Funding – As previously noted, networking is primarily concerned with developing a new way of working within the existing resources of network membership. Nevertheless, external funding is required to enable a network to employ a full-time co-ordinator – the central resource required for the effective development of a network. It is important to highlight that two of the networks involved in the Demonstration Programme closed immediately after the end of funding from the Combat Poverty Agency, because of a lack of funding to enable them to employ a full-time worker. A third network has continued with difficulty, without the guarantee of funding, while the other network has continued to develop in light assurances of funding for another three years from its local Area Partnership.

The Experience of participating Networks in the Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage

The following gives a brief outline of some of the work undertaken by the four networks involved in the Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage. It also highlights some of the principal outcomes to emerge from their work and offers a number of policy recommendations based on the networks' experience of developing integrated responses to educational disadvantage in their respective areas.

Priority areas of focus within the networks

While the networks of the Demonstration Programme were unique and distinctive in their own right, they shared many common characteristics. Each chose to undertake a consultation/community assessment phase in their development and each chose to focus on a number of specific issues related to educational disadvantage that were considered of particular significance in their specific areas. Some of those core issues included the following:

- Information Sharing and Raising Awareness of Educational Disadvantage;
- School Attendance;
- Parental Involvement in Education;
- Transition from Primary to Post Primary;

⁸ Particularly those with limited experience of working in a manner that requires regular meetings.

- Literacy Development;
- Traveller Participation in Education;
- Teacher Training;
- Increasing/Sharing educational resources in the area.

Each network developed a range of innovative collaborative actions aimed at addressing relevant issues. These include, among others:

The establishment of a Resource Bank that enabled network members to access materials that may have been of support to them in their work. The resource bank acted as a lending library for network members and contained materials related to early childhood education, primary and second level remedial resources, youth issues, health and social issues, adult learning and parenting support.

The development of Transition Programmes to facilitate the transfer of students from primary to second level schools.

The support and facilitation of the development of a Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme which is now operated by way of a partnership agreement between Kerry Education Services – the county VEC – and the Kerry Diocesan Youth Service. This unique LCA programme is structured around a specially created Youthreach centre and is designed as a progression route for young participants in training-employment programmes.

The development of activities designed to promote and support parental involvement in education. One example of this is the Parents Home Visitors scheme in Killinarden. In this scheme groups of parents have been trained to deliver information to other parents on behalf of the schools in their community and to act as a form of peer support for parents to become more involved in the education of their children.

The development of area-based responses to school attendance which:

- increase awareness of the extent and significance of school non-attendance (e.g. through the production of research reports and organisation of seminars locally);
- address the problem of school non-attendance (e.g. through the development of area-based school attendance committees involving key players engaged in the school attendance issue).

The creation of literacy sub-groups within networks to provide members with opportunities for information exchange, to explore new ideas and approaches to literacy development for children and adults, and to initiate new developments. Actions have included the development of Family Literacy Programmes aimed at assisting parents to enhance their literacy skills while also enabling them to support their children's acquisition of literacy skills.

The development of integrated working groups on Traveller Education. These facilitated dialogue concerning school attendance and the lack of Traveller transfer to second level education with a view to piloting specific programmes for supporting school retention of Traveller children.

The development of initiatives to increase information on service provision in the community. For instance, a poster on youth and sports activity and a directory of statutory and community services were produced and distributed widely throughout the community of Killinarden. Similarly, all networks have produced local newsletters informing their respective members of relevant developments both locally and nationally.

The establishment of an Elective Module on Educational Disadvantage by St. Patrick's College of Education in association with the Killinarden Education Network (KEN). This scheme was established to:

- enhance student teachers' awareness of issues pertaining to educational disadvantage;
- generate an interest among student teachers in teaching in an area of high socio-economic and educational disadvantage.

The module gave students a practical introduction to the Killinarden area and to the insights of a variety of key educational interests in the community working to address educational disadvantage.

Significantly, many of the interventions/approaches referred to above have enabled schools and communities to respond strategically to issues that they felt unable to address prior to the presence of the networks in their respective areas.

OUTCOMES

Apart from the range of innovative programmes that were developed by the networks, a number of other significant outcomes have emerged from the development of integrated responses in each of the network areas. These include, among others:

Participants within the networks of the Demonstration Programme gained new insights relating to educational disadvantage from the equal participation of diverse groups and grew to value the experience of working collaboratively. All networks facilitated and co-ordinated personnel from a variety of formal and informal educational sectors to come together to research, plan and develop integrated responses to educational disadvantage.

As a consequence, the development of interagency relationships is perceived as a strength in its own right by members within these networks. Many network members commented that this new experience of working collectively broke down the isolation they felt prior to the development of the Demonstration Programme networks in their respective areas.

Through the work of the networks, education is seen more in connection with other human needs and is appreciated in its broadest sense.

The development of local education networks has facilitated education providers to link their practical knowledge and experience of educational disadvantage into the development of local and national policy. Arising from the collective practical experiences of their members, all networks involved in the Demonstration Programme developed policy views on significant educational issues and have used these to influence the development of policy at both local and national levels. Key issues on which networks have developed policy statements include teacher education, the designation of disadvantaged status, literacy, early years interventions and the Education Welfare Bill.

In addition, it is evident that the existence of local education networks has facilitated the creation of greater local awareness of national policy issues and systems, and of the impact of policy decisions at the local level. Network structures have facilitated improved information sharing among network members on substantial policy developments such as the Education Welfare Bill and the Revised Primary School Curriculum. Members of the networks have commented on this as one of the most significant benefits to their membership.

The work of the networks has also resulted in a greater voice for parents in the development of education in their respective schools and communities. All networks

report that parents are equal partners within network structures with equal rights and responsibilities as other constituent members. Parents involved in the programme comment on experiencing greater levels of personal confidence and greater ownership of the education process.

The positive experiences of working in a collaborative fashion have had an equally positive influence on the manner in which education and service providers undertake activities with young people and their families within their own systems/disciplines. Network members comment on their increased understanding of, and response to, the needs of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds as a result of this exchange among the formal and informal education sectors. This increased responsiveness to needs has resulted in positive outcomes for many young people and families experiencing educational disadvantage in the network areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The experience of the Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage has shown that there is a key role for local networks in stimulating and developing integrated responses to educational disadvantage. The following policy recommendations are made arising out of that experience:

The role of a full-time employed network co-ordinator in each area has been critical in creating the conditions whereby effective inter-agency relationships have been developed and sustained to tackle disadvantage at a local level. The role of the network co-ordinator is primarily one of enabler and is essentially about supporting and resourcing the process of networking. It is recommended that this should be a feature of future networks which build on the experience of the Demonstration Programme.

Teacher involvement must be at the centre of integrated responses to tackle educational disadvantage. Whilst there is an implicit recognition of this at policy level, the capacity of teachers to engage is limited by the demands of their job. There is a need to facilitate the engagement of teachers in integrated processes and to release them, within agreed parameters, from direct teaching responsibilities for this purpose.

There is a need to build awareness among teachers about the nature, causes and extent of educational disadvantage. This should be done through the development of appropriate modules both within initial teacher training and as part of ongoing in-service provision.

There is a need at educational policy level to affirm and resource the role of informal education providers, particularly in the context of educational disadvantage, and draw in expertise from within this sector to complement in-school provision with particular reference to teaching methodologies, curriculum content and monitoring.

Resources are needed to support the development of new and emerging models of parental involvement, which support parents as equal partners in tackling educational disadvantage.

The development of integrated structures and processes at local level should be matched by parallel structures and processes at central policy level. Links and intermediary mechanisms between these levels are needed to direct issues and lessons on the ground into policy development at national level.

'Second tier'⁹ support to local education networks is required to support integrated ways of working. This support should include technical advice and assistance, opportunities for training and networking, seminars and conferences on key issues,

⁹ Similar to that offered by the Combat Poverty Agency to the networks of the Demonstration Programme.

research and evaluation support and links to other programmes, initiatives and policy developments.

There has been a welcome recognition of the need for whole school planning and review. Training and support will be needed to maximise the potential of this approach. In addition, consideration should be given to including non-school educational partners (e.g. local youth and community organisations, statutory services, etc.) in this process as appropriate.

While there has been a recognition in policy arenas of the necessity for integrated responses, including networking, to address educational disadvantage, it cannot be assumed that what is written in policy will be translated into action at both local and national levels. It is essential, therefore, that all those seeking to address educational disadvantage in a meaningful way engage in integrated processes and ensure that networking is put into general practice.

Conclusion

This guide has attempted to present a comprehensive overview of networks and the means by which they can be developed as a mechanism for addressing educational disadvantage through the integration of home, school, community and other interests. The essence of effective networks that facilitate locally based, integrated and strategic approaches to educational disadvantage is:

- their recognition that educational disadvantage is not just a school issue – other partners have a very significant role to play;
- their strategic approach to educational disadvantage;
- their shared analysis of the situation in their respective areas;
- their inclusive nature and their equality of opportunity to participate;
- their shared ownership;
- their focus on enhanced outcomes for young people at risk of/experiencing educational disadvantage.

Useful References

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