

Narrowing attainment gap to cancel out poverty impact

By Katie Macleod

Research shows that by the time a child reaches school, there is a significant gap in vocabulary between the most and least deprived children – and it’s a gap in attainment that widens as the school years pass.

But thanks to funding from the Scottish Government’s Pupil Equity Fund, measures are being put in place to close this poverty-related gap.

The Pupil Equity Fund is part of an overarching national strategy, the Scottish Attainment Challenge, which requires each local authority to enact measures which will address the attainment gap. Money from the Fund is then allocated directly to schools, and can be spent at the discretion of Head Teachers working in partnership with their local authority.

For the 2017-18 period, the Western Isles received £1200 for every school pupil registered for free school meals in P1 – S3. “Pupil Equity Fund money is targeted at attainment, specifically literacy, numeracy, and health and wellbeing,” says Comhairle nan Eilean Siar’s Senior Education Officer, Agnes Macdonald. “Schools have to use

that money in innovative ways to improve the attainment of children whose literacy, numeracy, or health and well-being is not progressing as it should.”

This year, 22 of the 24 schools in the Western Isles decided to work together and pool their Pupil Equity Funding, and with the help of additional money from the Comhairle, recruited 12 Education Apprentices and six Gaelic Language Assistants to work across these schools to help close the attainment gap.

The apprentices’ role “is to support individual pupils and groups of pupils in whichever way the school or the head teacher feels would be most beneficial to the pupils identified,” explains Agnes, adding that in addition to using data on free school meals, schools also look at five key measures to identify which children might need more support. These are attendance, inclusion, attainment, engagement, and participation. “We’re looking at the holistic view of the learner.”

“In the Western Isles, as nationally, we target those children who are on free school meals in the first instance, and then look at those who may have other barriers. Maybe they’re looked-after children, speak English as an additional language,

or have social, emotional or behavioural issues which may be barriers to learning.”

Also connected to the Pupil Equity Fund is the methodology of “Raising Attainment for All,” or RAFA, the national programme for raising attainment. “The key aim is that at least 85 per cent of learners at the key milestones of P1, P4, P7, and S3 will have reached the appropriate level, or have gone beyond it,” says Agnes. She explains that the methodology involves frequently measuring a pupil’s progress on a line graph, so any dips in progress can be assessed and immediately addressed.

All teachers and apprentices have been trained in this RAFA methodology, where, in the majority of cases, young people “reflect on their own learning, identify targets for improvement, and measure their own progress towards those targets. They’re immediately more engaged and motivated and more likely to take responsibility for their own learning, and then more likely to succeed.”

Collaborative use of the Pupil Equity Fund is not the only way in which the Western Isles is working to “poverty proof” schools. Schools are working to promote free school meals and clothing grants; reduce the number of no uniform days; encourage

school uniform swaps; and reduce the frequency with which they approach parents for fundraising contributions. “It’s about finding as many ways as possible to reduce the financial burden on families, and to support them in as many ways as possible,” says Agnes.

“Our approach is innovative. We’ve got apprentices in 22 of our schools targeting areas that the schools have identified. Some of them are running breakfast clubs, lunch time activities, after-school clubs, and homework clubs, and some have taken children out on excursions during holidays.”

“It’s those children who haven’t had those rich experiences, whose experiences of life beyond the home are more limited, they’re the ones who struggle with attainment, and so the Education Apprentices have a role to play in helping them have those experiences.”

“For many, it’s poverty of opportunity and experience, often a result of financial poverty, that creates barriers to learning and attainment. Key to raising attainment is providing children, at the earliest stages with rich experiences to develop their vocabulary and to help them to ‘make sense’ of the world.”