KEY POLICIES

TRUANCY AND SCHOOL EXCLUSION : REPORT BY THE SOCIAL EXCLUSION UNIT : RESPONSE OF THE NATIONAL UNION OF TEACHERS

Introduction

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Social Exclusion Unit's (SEU) report on truancy and school exclusion.

GENERAL COMMENTS

The NUT also welcomes the report as the first comprehensive report of its kind on the issues of truancy and exclusion which also covers and co-ordinates the work of separate Government Departments and separate LEA services.

The NUT further welcomes the acknowledgement in the report that:

- a. the reasons why pupils truant are complex and include problems in families, with poverty, with fear of a lack of job opportunities, with disaffection from school, with peer pressures and with a lack of training, support and resources for schools;

- b. fragmented responsibilities and a lack of political attention at the highest level has compounded the problem;

- c. effective solutions depend on clear goals and clear allocation of responsibility between the different partners;

- d. schools cannot be expected to solve the problems of truancy and exclusions on their own and that parents, social services departments and LEAs all have a role to play;

- e. social disadvantage presents real and powerful obstacles to social inclusion and that it has a strong negative impact on the educational opportunities of children, particular for children from poorer backgrounds and from inner city areas;

- f. educational and school-based factors for non attendance include pupils with specific learning difficulties, anxieties about coursework deadlines, bullying at school and the perceived irrelevance of the National Curriculum;

- g. exclusions tend to be higher in areas of social deprivation and that excluded pupils generally experience considerable disadvantage with high levels of family stress including high unemployment, low income and family disruption, poor acquisition of basic skills, limited aspirations and opportunities, poverty and poor relationships between pupils, teachers and parents;

- h. the rise in exclusions can also be attributed to the educational climate and policy, resource constraints and lack of training;
• i. the disproportionate exclusions of black pupils are a serious cause for concern;

• j. in order to prevent and manage exclusions, teachers need to be well trained in behaviour management with an equal opportunities perspective;

• k. although teachers are at the front line in having to deal with pupils with problems, neither the causes nor the effects of truancy and exclusion can be understood solely in educational terms.

THE REPORT'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the report recognises that the reasons for truancy are complex, it is regrettable that the recommendations tend to concentrate on the enforcement of truants to attend school. As a recent report by UNISON says:

• "This is a simplistic solution to a complex problem that requires a more strategic approach, more resources and a commitment to early intervention, proper follow-up and support."

The recommendation in the report that the Government will set national targets for truancy and exclusions and take powers to require school-level truancy targets ignores the varying circumstances of schools and disproportionate time, resources and one-to-one attention that some pupils need.

The recommendation to publish data on schools' performance on truancy and exclusion yet again adopts a policy of "naming and shaming" in the misplaced belief that this will force schools to "improve". This recommendation is punitive in its approach and is unlikely to help achieve the Government's aim of making a "step-change in the scale of truancy and exclusions from schools". The NUT believes that LEAs should play a strategic role in intervening early to tackle truancy and exclusion levels in school.

It is clear that for pupils the quality of the curriculum is a critical element in developing their commitment to schools and, thus, minimising truancy and disaffection. It is not just a question of "opening up opportunities for the wider use of work-related learning at Key Stage 4" or "clarifying guidance on appropriate circumstances to disapply the National Curriculum for younger age pupils" as the report proposes. Getting right the National Curriculum entitlement for all pupils from the beginning of their education is vital. This includes high quality early years education with an appropriate curriculum based on structured play. QCA's review of the National Curriculum must enable teachers to use their professional judgement in adapting the curriculum for individual pupils' needs. It must be remembered that the overloaded and over prescriptive curriculum has been largely responsible for the reduction in Personal and Social Education and pastoral time in schools.

In addition to the much needed review of the curriculum, a substantial injection of new resources is needed to support schools in tackling truancy and exclusions. Practical solutions include the re-establishment of behaviour and education welfare support services, space and time for professional development and resources in secondary schools of trained
counsellors for pupils.

It is axiomatic that exclusion and truancy are joined up problems which need joined up solutions. Yet Government policies on tackling social exclusion conflict. The Government is pressing ahead with its proposals in its consultation paper Fair Funding : Improving Delegation to Schools'. It is proposed that the Government retains four blocks of expenditure. Unless LEAs can retain expenditure for services which both help reduce exclusion and truancy and which can liaise and act with other local authority services, the LEA will be an ineffective partner in joint activities.

Paragraph 29 of the Government's consultation document on LMS asks whether LEAs should retain funding for LEA behaviour support services. The answer must be yes' and that funding should extend to those services which enable an LEA to provide flexibly effective advisory support or additional staff to schools without the costs being charged to schools' budgets.

The NUT welcomes the proposal in paragraph 5.24 of the Social Exclusion Unit report that the resource implications for LEAs for providing for excluded children should come into the terms of the Comprehensive Spending Review. Extra resources are welcome. However, the review fails to recognise the structural problems for co-ordination and support engendered by LMS. It also fails to identify those resources which may be allocated for reducing social exclusion. It may be that the task of reviewing the allocation mechanism from the Government to LEAs (the ESSA) has been given to the DETR in its review of Local Government Finance. If that is the case, then the NUT looks forward to being consulted, with all other interested organisations, on any DETR proposals.

The NUT believes that the measures proposed in the report in relation to the explicit powers to give Courts the option to impose a parenting order on parents are unnecessarily draconian with respect to the majority of parents. The NUT recognises the need to emphasise the importance of parental responsibility. However, in most cases parents are not aware that their children are truanting and it seems unusually harsh to penalise parents for something that they are not aware of and do not, on the whole, condone.

The NUT is disappointed that the measures proposed to tackle the disproportionate exclusions of black pupils are restricted to promoting "community mentoring". The reasons for the disproportionate exclusions of black pupils are complex and require a range of measures if this serious problem is to be tackled effectively. The TTA has a vital role to play with respect to both initial teacher training and continuous professional development to ensure that teachers are equipped with the skills to meet the particular needs of black pupils.

Finally, if LEAs are to be responsible for setting targets for both truancy and exclusions, then it is essential, in the spirit of social partnership, that both teachers and their organisations are involved.

The NUT looks forward to further reports from the SEU and urges it to take cognisance of the issues raised in this response.