

Study of the School Gates Employment Support Initiative

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This report presents qualitative findings from the study of the School Gates Employment Initiative. This mostly involved qualitative research in 13 of the 25 pilot areas, which included interviews with school heads, Regional Development Agency (RDA) leads, Jobcentre Plus, local authorities and devolved administrations, parents and parent support staff in schools. It also involved two semi-structured group discussions with local partners at two practitioner events in November 2010, as well as a review of evidence presented in the Management Information (MI) and the quarterly reports from the pilot areas.

The findings of this report strongly support the notion that schools, Jobcentre Plus and local authority employment advisers can play a potentially important role in moving parents from low incomes towards work. School Gates' reach to potential second earners and parents on low incomes, many of whom are not on benefits and are new customers to Jobcentre Plus, has been a key strength of the pilot. Many parents engaged in the pilot were also lone parents, some of whom were also not in receipt of benefits. In this way, many school sites have provided a critical mass of families within these target groups for Jobcentre Plus and other local authority employment advisers to engage with.

However, simply making employability support available in schools is not enough. The experience of School Gates clearly highlights the need for a range of proactive techniques to engage parents and the important role that trusted school staff and word-of-mouth have in facilitating this engagement.

Overall, the qualitative evidence of the pilot's impact on parents' journey towards work has been considerable, emphasising the value of outreach in offering a personalised, tailored and flexible service

in an environment which parents feel comfortable in. Parents appreciated being able to access support on their own 'turf' and moving towards work at a pace which better reflected their needs. Local partners also considered these features to be core strengths of the School Gates pilot.

The most effective approaches to moving parents towards work have been delivered by one or more of the Jobcentre Plus and local authority employment advisers who have been able to co-ordinate a multi-agency response, or address the parents' needs by linking in with a wider network of local support. This has avoided duplication and has ensured that barriers are not addressed in isolation by different agencies. One particular 'added value' of having Jobcentre Plus as a delivery partner has been in providing in-depth advice around benefits and in doing better-off-calculations.

Closer partnership working has been a key outcome of the pilot in many areas, with many local partners effectively linking the pilot into existing provision and/or forming new partnerships to ensure that they can provide flexible parent-focused employability support. Successful partnership working has often depended upon the sustained and committed engagement of all senior partners, and particularly schools. It has also depended upon how far partners can demonstrate flexibility towards their own organisational culture and working practices to progress the pilot aims.

Beyond this, there is evidence to suggest that the pilot adds important value in other ways. School Gates provides an opportunity to embed the 'bigger picture' of work being the 'norm'. This is consistent with the Government message that parents who have children in full-time education and who are able to work, should be in work or actively seeking

work. This is particularly relevant for communities that are characterised by entrenched worklessness and at a time when changes to the benefits system will require more lone parents claiming Income Support to seek work sooner rather than later.

There is also evidence that School Gates has been a key public relations (PR) opportunity for Jobcentre Plus, with positive support from Jobcentre Plus advisers resulting in many positive comments about the organisation from parents, often in stark contrast to much lower expectations that they had about Jobcentre Plus.

In light of the findings and conclusions set out in this report, we make the following recommendations to local partners and to the Child Poverty Unit (CPU). All of these recommendations centre around how similar provision could be delivered more effectively and efficiently in the future.

- Effective partnership working needs to underpin the delivery of employability support in schools. Partnership working between local partners is key to delivering positive outcomes for parents on low incomes. As such, lead delivery agencies, such as local authorities and devolved administrations, should work to ensure that they have secured the buy-in of key partners and that, where possible, the pilot is embedded within existing networks of complementary support to deliver longer-term sustainability and value for money. However, in some cases this may also involve linking the pilot with new providers in areas which have previously not worked together (for example, linking employability support with wider family support or early years provision).
- Involve the right schools. Selecting schools in the most deprived areas has proven key in this pilot to reaching the target group of parents. However, within this selection, an equally important factor needs to be selecting the right school. The experience of School Gates suggests that the 'right' school is one with a head who is committed to, and on board with, the pilot aims and who can recognise the ways in which the pilot could benefit

the work of the school and its community of parents and children. The evidence also suggests that having a school which has the staff capacity to support the advisers is key, particularly in providing trusted 'frontline' school staff who could help engage parents in the pilot. Schools without these features would need to demonstrate that they have other support functions in place to integrate employability provision into the school and to help facilitate the engagement of parents. This would help ensure greater efficiency when delivering employability support in schools.

- Allow a longer lead-in time and a longer time to run an initiative of this kind. This is important in ensuring that enough time is given to plan delivery, secure relevant partners and achieve results. The experience of School Gates clearly demonstrates that 18 months is not an adequate timescale, particularly given some of the multiple barriers to work that many parents had.
- Have dedicated resources upfront to provide local areas with sufficient leverage to draw in local partners and hold them accountable to some degree. Additional resources do not always lead to additionality in provision or outcomes, as some areas have achieved both on very limited funding. However, it does help plan delivery and also ensures better levels of trust with both local partners and parents.
- Draw on the pilot's archive of good practice to guide other local authorities and schools who are looking to address child poverty in their area through tackling worklessness and unemployment. The future trend towards greater localism in service provision will require experiences drawn from a variety of delivery models, such as those which were deployed in School Gates. Local partners in other areas may find this archive of good practice and achievements particularly useful when encouraging schools to participate in similar partnerships.

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