
“Every School Should Have One”

An Evaluation of the Success of the Dunfermline High School/Apex Scotland Inclusion Unit

Introduction

In 2007 Dunfermline High School entered into a partnership with Apex Scotland to set up and deliver a new service intended to reduce exclusions and complement the work of the school Behavioural Support Department. The Apex Scotland/Dunfermline High School Inclusion Unit at Dunfermline High School in Fife works with pupils who are excluded or are at risk of exclusion to a range of learning techniques and coping strategies which will enable them to return to mainstream lessons and improve the level of academic achievement.

*“The Inclusion Unit was designed to be a part of our overall system for supporting pupils. We recognised the systems and resources we had were not enough, and could benefit from some outside expertise.” DHS
Depute Rector*

Success by numbers

In 2007-2008, the first year that Inclusion Unit was operational, there was a reduction of 52% in exclusions at Dunfermline High School. In comparison, the overall reduction across all Fife was 14%, and across Scotland reduction in the rate of exclusion achieved was considerably lower at 11%. The following year exclusions at Dunfermline High School dropped a further 20%. The figures speak for themselves. Since the introduction of the Inclusion Unit, Dunfermline High School has achieved a significantly greater reduction in exclusions than the average for Fife and for Scotland as a whole.

Although not directly designed as an indicator of the effectiveness of the Inclusion Unit in 2009/10 Dunfermline High School had lower levels of unauthorised absence across all school years than the whole of Fife¹ – a fact that may be attributable to the system of support offered to young people in Dunfermline High School of which the Inclusion Unit is a key part.

Understanding success

*“We knew this service delivered the goods, but we needed to be able to say how it did so if we were to persuade others to invest in it.” Apex
Depute Director.*

In March 2011, Colin Duff was asked by Apex Scotland to undertake an evaluation of the Inclusion Unit. The success of Inclusion Unit in reducing exclusions was already evident in the reduction achieved in the number of exclusions. The aim of the evaluation was to assess the factors that contributed to success, to describe the key features of the service and review the potential opportunities for replication of the approach.

¹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/03/04154230/0>

Summary of success

The effectiveness of the service is achieved through a combination of **four main factors**

- The **overall positive ethos** of the school system, best exemplified by the fact that the Unit is designed to support *inclusion* as a positive core concept intended to benefit young people, rather than *alternatives to exclusion* as negative and ameliorative attempt to manage or treat young people to the benefit of the school
- The fact that the service is perceived as, and operates as, part of a **whole school system of support** for pupils at risk of exclusion, and
- The **skills and attributes** of the staff delivering the service
- The **flexibility of the actual activities and educational approach** undertaken by the staff and young people,

The **combination of these factors leads to an overall ‘buy-in’** to the success of the service from all of the important stakeholders and influencers on the service success; young people, schools staff and Apex Scotland/Dunfermline High School Inclusion Unit staff have a clear sense of the value of the unit and its place within the overall system of support for pupils.

“The stuff we do in the Inclusion Unit, it doesn’t just help us with life in school. It helps us when we are out at night and at the weekend, with our friends and families, helping us to make better choices.”
DHS Pupil

Success by Design

When the present Dunfermline High School rector, Brian Blanchflower, was appointed in 2007 exclusions were significantly greater and a high priority was placed on reducing the number of exclusions. The new rector and Depute Rector, Louise Ramsay undertook a scoping exercise to identify the key features of an effective service and approach to reducing exclusions.

The most telling outcome of this scoping exercise was a shift in thinking away from a focus on *reducing exclusions* and towards an interest in creating a school where ethos and practice *supported inclusion*. This simple shift created a space for a service that sought to support the young person find their place in school community, and contrasts strongly with earlier approaches which seek to manage the young person as a problem for the school community.

“Staff at Dunfermline High School had become increasingly concerned both by the adverse effect on life choices of pupils who were excluded from school due to poor behaviour, and by the consequent impact on the local community of those disaffected and disengaged pupils. This appeared to be a ‘lose-lose’ situation... We decided that we needed to turn this into a ‘win-win’ situation – one where pupils could remain engaged in their school work and so have the opportunity to achieve their potential, whilst also learning the value of good citizenship through making positive choices, ...It seemed very obvious that ‘Exclusion’ was not the right tool for this job” **Depute Rector**

The success of Inclusion Unit in reducing exclusions is a success not a success of the Inclusion Unit alone, but of the whole school and its approach to providing a positive learning environment and universal support to pupils, including those at risk of exclusion.

The Inclusion Unit does not stand alone within the school. It is not an alternative to participation in the school – a place where pupils go to be excluded – it is a part of the whole school system and a place where pupils go to be more *included*. This is key to understanding the success of the Inclusion Unit in reducing exclusions.

Guidance staff and pupil support staff have a clear idea of the benefits that the Inclusion Unit offers to them, and consider it an essential complement to the support they offer pupils at risk of exclusion.

“Some pupils come to our attention not because of any significant disruptive behaviour, but because they do not appear to be doing well in school. They are not engaged in class, they do poorly in academic work, they fail to attend. These pupils do not need to be excluded – they effectively are excluding themselves from the life of the school. DHS Teacher

The 2010 HMIe report ‘Out of Site, Out of Mind?’² found that *“In the best practice, designated bases in mainstream schools provide a supportive ethos for young people in danger of being excluded. They provide them with appropriate experiences, and clear targets designed to help them progress steadily within the curriculum and improve their behaviour. In the best practice, staff monitor young people’s progress closely against these targets and help them return as soon as possible to mainstream classwork”*.

“What it does is create a system. The whole school is concerned with supporting the inclusion of these – and every – pupil. We all work together to include them in the school. Traditionally things like this were seen as ‘sin-bins’ a place to send troublesome kids where it became someone else’s problem to deal with them. The approach we have taken with this Inclusion Unit brings the whole school to the table. We’re all responsible.” DHS Guidance Teacher

Exclusions are not reduced in the long term simply because the school has an alternative disposal for offenders who would otherwise be excluded. Exclusions are reduced, and stay at low levels, because the Inclusion unit *as part of a ‘whole school’ system of inclusion*, supports young people to return to mainstream schooling and better manage the issues that present them with difficulties in the first place.

The place of the Inclusion Unit as the hub of the overall pupil inclusion infrastructure of the school is demonstrated by

- The Inclusion Unit is staffed by employees of Apex Scotland, however for all intents and purposes the staff are treated within the school as full members of schools staff. Inclusion Unit staff will invariably already be aware of pupils before a referral is made and may have participated in other deliberative and decision-making processes in relation the support provided to the pupil prior to referral.

² <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/oosoom.html>

- Inclusion Unit staff attend the School Liaison Group – a multi-agency group whose purpose is to plan and action appropriate interventions to support individual young people and their families.
- Teaching staff liaise on an everyday basis with Inclusion Unit staff on curricular work and pastoral care. As one guidance teacher commented *“there is a web of information centred on the Inclusion Unit staff that benefits us all in supporting pupils.”*
- The whole-school recognition of achievement within the unit exemplified by the Apex self-development award, a recent development which recognises achievement in personal development by pupils attending the unit.

Success through staff skills

Young people feel a strong association with the Apex Scotland/Dunfermline High School Inclusion Unit staff, and place a high value on the quality of support offered. Without exception, all informants to the evaluation, pupils, schools staff, Apex management staff and others, highlighted the skills of the Inclusion Unit staff in establishing and maintain strong, productive relationships with pupils as the single most important factor in the success of the initiative. Indications are that these skills are not simply a result of good fortune in recruitment, but are a consequence of Apex Scotland Recruitment policies, training packages and management support.

*“We have had other Apex Scotland staff in the Inclusion Unit, and I am not concerned that if one or more of the current staff move on that the success of our Inclusion Unit would be at risk. What we buy from Apex is access to staff with the skills we require, with the training and management support which allows them to be effective.
DHS Depute Rector.*

This is further evidenced in the clearly observable fact that pupils referred to the Inclusion Unit return to the unit voluntarily throughout the remainder of their school career. In one notable case, when the evaluator first visited the school, he was met and escorted from reception by a *former pupil* and alumni of the Inclusion Unit who had returned in their own time to assist the unit staff in meeting with the evaluator. This offers a very favourably indication of the quality of relationship established by the Inclusion Unit staff and the lasting impact of that relationship.

*“The Inclusion Unit staff, because of their training and professional background, have a different mindset. The best teachers are those that establish a strong and productive relationship. A teacher of Maths, English etc doesn’t have those skills – and to an extent their position limits them – but the Inclusion Unit staff are specialists at this.” **DHS Rector***

‘Included, Engaged, Involved, Part 2’, a March 2011 Scottish Government report³ highlighted the importance of building positive relationships as a key feature of managing behaviour and noted that staff [referring to teaching staff in Scotland] needed opportunities to extend their knowledge, skills and confidence in this area.

³ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/03/17095258/0>

The paramount importance of building positive relationships is further underlined in the HMIE report Improving the Odds, Improving Life Chances⁴.

The report states that *"Inspectors established that of all the features identified by learners, teachers and senior managers as key to improving the odds, the most important was the quality of the relationships between staff and learners throughout the school or department. The characteristics of high quality relationships were mutual respect and trust, high expectations and aspirations, and self-belief: a shared 'can do' attitude."*

Success through flexibility

The nature of the service itself is extremely flexible and presents some challenges in defining in simple and brief terms. In common with other developments in public sector service provision, the actual service is more clearly focused on the achievement of outcomes than the delivery of pre-set activities or processes. Despite this it is possible to describe a clear educational pedagogy applied by staff, and an Inclusion Unit curriculum informed by an acceptance of the pupil as a young person who is subject to a host of influences from peers, family and wider community.

It's like we all do something. There's no need to act like [pauses] anything. You can just be yourself. Cos if you speak you know nobody is going to laugh at you, and you know that somebody else might learn something from you." DHS pupil

Although on a day-to-day basis the topics covered are led by themes of interest to the young people, the Inclusion Unit has a clear curriculum focused on

- Relationships with families and peers.
- Alcohol and drugs.
- Sexual relationships.
- Managing emotions.
- Decision-making and understanding the consequences of actions

These curriculum areas are supported by a suite of lesson plans developed in the Inclusion Unit and other Apex Scotland practice settings. The staff have the skills and confidence to subtly and sophisticatedly use dialogical education techniques to allow educational outcomes to emerge through skilfully facilitated conversation. This has the effect of blurring the educator/educatee distinction common to traditional schooling and allowing pupils to contribute their own perspectives and experience, and in the process participate in a mutual analysis of their own attitudes, behaviour and their impact on their current and future circumstances.

"for these young people, the gulf between their actions now and their future life chances is not easily comprehended. For some young people the relation between action and consequence either needs to be more immediate, or we need to find ways to persuade them to understand the longer-term effects of their actions." **DHS Teacher**

⁴ <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/itoilc.html>

This acceptance of young people as part of a broader community, rather than simply as pupils within a school is further evident in a second major element of the educational approach taken. Pupils attending the Apex Scotland/Dunfermline High School Inclusion Unit are supported to participate in extra-curricular activity, specifically the planning and implementation of small projects designed to benefit others within the community. Pupils have held fairs, coffee mornings, sponsored events and other activities in the community.

This has the multiple effects of building their leadership, planning and teamwork skills, demonstrating to the pupils that they have the capacity to contribute to others, and to complete a task – something which they may not have been successful in the past. A number of of the pupils attending the unit have been involved in anti-social behaviour and indications from schools staff are that this sort of activity helps to support pupils to appreciate the impact of their behaviour on others.

Replicating Success

The evaluation brief tasked the consultant to consider the opportunities available to replicate the service in other locations in Scotland.

There are 376 secondary schools in Scotland, and hence 376 *potential* buyers of the Apex Scotland Inclusion Unit service. Apex Scotland however face the challenge of identifying schools which may benefit more from a service of this nature, and persuading schools to prioritise resources to establish and operate services. Local Authorities are asked to collect and report statistics on exclusions to the Scottish Government in September of each year. Schools are required to *“collect and analyse data on the pattern of exclusions within the school, not only to identify patterns in respect of individual pupils, but also to identify patterns which indicate the need for targeted support or review of practice... Following on from such auditing, education authorities and schools should take active steps to address any issues so revealed, for example through continuing professional development, additional guidance or targeted management support.”*⁵

The challenge for Apex Scotland is unlikely to be in establishing a need for such a service in Scottish Schools, but in identifying schools or other stakeholder groups who have the resources to invest in such a service. There appears to be no direct financial incentive for schools to prioritise resources to reduce exclusions. Therefore it is not easy to make a direct case that they ought to invest in it. It may be possible however to make the case to the school that their options are

- Continue to exclude make high numbers of exclusions.
- Invest schools staff time in reducing exclusions.
- Invest in partnership with Apex to reduce exclusions.

The cost of the Dunfermline High School service is equivalent to 0.5 FTE teachers at the top of a salary scale. Therefore it may be possible to make a case that going into partnership with Apex is *less expensive* than not going into partnership with Apex.

“If we didn’t have an Inclusion Unit in our school, we would have been excluded or expelled by now – every school should have one.”

Dunfermline High School Pupil

⁵ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2003/11/18496/28823>