

Report of a Survey of

The Educational Provision for

School Aged Mothers

in Northern Ireland

Education and Training Inspectorate

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Inspected: April-June 2005

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In 1997, the Department of Education (DE), the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and the Catholic Council for Maintained Schools (CCMS) jointly produced a strategy and framework for the education of school aged mothers.

The mission statement in the document is:

“To provide the best possible opportunities for school aged mothers (and pregnant school girls), to learn and develop, so as to help them fulfil their potential and to contribute to society and the economy.”

- 1.2 Research carried out by Barnardo’s in 2000, highlighted the potential vulnerability of teenage parents and their children, with high numbers of them disengaged from education and training and living on social security benefits. Research has shown that many of the poor outcomes associated with teenage pregnancies are preventable, if the appropriate support services are put in place.
- 1.3 The first School Aged Mother (SAM) project was piloted in the North-Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) in 1999, mainly in response to concerns about the needs of school aged mothers and, in particular, about the pattern of young women not completing their education following the birth of their child. School Aged Mother projects have since been established in each ELB area.
- 1.4 In September 2000, DE sent a letter to schools (see Appendix), along with a copy of “Circles and Hoops – Information for Young Parents”. The letter referred to the 1997 policy framework, stating:

“The framework has as its underpinning principle that the best place for the continued education of a pregnant school girl or school aged mother is at school, and that all support should be directed towards facilitating her to

complete compulsory education and remain in education beyond year 12, if this is appropriate. The framework envisages the first source of support being the pastoral care teacher in the school, and then a named Education Welfare Officer being the contact point for the support from the Education and Library Board and for working with other agencies on the young woman's behalf."

The "Circles and Hoops" publication also included information and advice on a wide range of practical issues under the headings: 'Money', 'Housing', 'Childcare', 'Yourself', 'Education' and 'Contacts'. The information contained in "Circles and Hoops" can also be accessed at www.the-hub-ni.com.

- 1.5 In order to implement the SAM provision across Northern Ireland, DE made a successful bid to the Children's Executive Programme Fund; the money secured was allocated to each ELB. A Senior Education Welfare Officer, acting in the role of local co-ordinator, oversees the SAM provision in each ELB area. Barnardo's provides overall support for SAM provision through a Regional Co-ordinator. The latter has established cross-ELB networks and works to maintain a consistent approach in the support offered to young mothers regionally.
- 1.6 In addition to the work which takes place at ELB level, DE chairs a Regional Steering Group for SAM provision. The membership of this Group comprises representatives from each ELB, CCMS, Barnardo's, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Northern Ireland) and the Health and Personal Social Services Trusts, as well as the DE chair. The role of the Steering Group is for the overall management of the provision and for providing strategic direction.
- 1.7 The aims of the survey are to evaluate the provision for school aged mothers across the five ELBs, to highlight the characteristics of good practice, and to identify areas for improvement in existing provision.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Between March and June 2005, the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) visited all of the ELBs and interviewed the Senior Education Welfare Officers and other key personnel involved in the SAM projects. A wide range of supporting documentation was provided by each ELB. The Inspectorate interviewed 14 young school aged mothers from three of the ELBs.
- 2.2 The Inspectorate also considered relevant documents and reports including 'Myths and Realities' (2000), an inter-departmental and multi-sectoral report, which identified teenage parenthood as one of the four main priorities to be addressed within the Government's agenda for promoting social inclusion. This document outlined a strategy aimed at reducing teenage pregnancy and supporting teenage parents and their children.
- 2.3 The Human Rights Act (2000) emphasises the right to education for all. The Children (Northern Ireland) Order (1995) places a duty on authorities to "safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their areas who are in need." Within the Health and Social Services, this duty is interpreted as including the needs of any mother aged under 18 years, and her child, and is facilitated under the Children Services' Planning processes.

3. PROVISION ACROSS THE EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARDS

- 3.1 In 2003-2004, 141 young women were referred to the SAM projects across the five ELBs, with 135 of these receiving specific support. The age range of young women was 13-19 years, with the majority of referrals (65) for pupils in year 12 (aged 16 years). The youngest referrals were two young women in year 9 (aged 13 years) and one in year 10 (aged 14 years). While the total number of referrals to the SAM projects has remained relatively consistent over the last few years, the fluctuations in the numbers

of referrals, within and across the ELBs, add to the difficulties of planning for ongoing or future SAM services, year on year.

- 3.2 Across all of the ELBs, the preferred option is for the young pregnant woman or parent to remain in school, with the SAM projects providing external support. For this to be successful, the school must have a suitable ethos and pastoral care provision to be able to provide the appropriate support for the pupil. Where the young woman remains in a supportive school environment, SAM support tends to take the form of half-day group sessions covering a range of personal, social, health and educational (PSHE) topics. The participants report that they benefit also from the contact with, and the support from, their peers within the group sessions.
- 3.3 The focus of the work is on meeting the individual needs of the young women, many of whom are disaffected or simply do not wish to remain in school. A range of provision and approaches are planned to meet the needs of these young mothers.
- ▷ Some young women receive support from a tutor at home. However, this provision is not consistent across the ELBs, neither in its availability nor in the number of hours input permitted.
 - ▷ Some school aged mothers attend small community based alternative education projects outside the mainstream school and follow a curriculum usually based on English, mathematics and information and communication technology.
 - ▷ For those young women who leave school and attend Colleges of Further Education or Training Organisations, individual support and attendance at group PSHE sessions is available in some of the ELBs. Again, this provision is not consistent across the ELBs mainly due to the fact that many of the SAM Project Workers are allocated to this work on a part-time basis and have other work-related responsibilities. This means that they have to prioritise their time and often

can only cater for those young women of compulsory school age.

- 3.4 The objectives of the projects are to support young women who are pregnant, or who are young mothers, to continue their education, to access appropriate health care and to secure a personal development programme to meet their needs. All of the SAM projects have appropriate pastoral care and child protection policies and procedures in place to govern their work. All of the projects work with their local Social Services Trusts to ensure that young mothers have access to good quality childcare arrangements. In some of the ELBs, group sessions are held in the local hospital and, in all the ELBs, relationships with health care professionals are excellent. In the instances of high quality provision observed, careful planning led to a range of agencies and professionals coming together to share and agree joint working arrangements to address those needs related to early pregnancy.

4. CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD PRACTICE

- 4.1 At the level of the individual school, provision for the pupils should include a preventative approach to school age pregnancy, with awareness raising for pupils within an effective pastoral care system which embraces all. Good provision for school aged mothers is characterised by many or all of the following features:
- ▷ a whole-school approach and a non-judgemental commitment to assisting the young mothers to continue their education while managing their child;
 - ▷ a range of support services, including access to counselling and parenting training;
 - ▷ a regular means of communicating with and on behalf of the young mother, as appropriate;

- ▷ an appropriate curriculum to take account of the circumstances of the young mother's situation and her further education; and
- ▷ facilities provided by allied agencies to help the young mother address her social, emotional and economic needs, as well as her needs in relation to education.

5. THE STRENGTHS OF THE CURRENT PROVISION

5.1 This survey has identified a number of important strengths including:

- ▷ the strong commitment of all of the ELBs to providing support services to school aged mothers;
- ▷ the value placed by the young mothers on the emotional, social and practical support provided by the SAM project workers;
- ▷ the flexible range of provision across all of the ELBs, where SAM projects are not viewed as a substitute for school; first and foremost, school was the preferred option;
- ▷ the wide range of achievements of the young women taking part in the SAM programmes from entry level through to General Certificate of Education Advanced Level;
- ▷ the effective multi-agency team approaches, including excellent relationships with health care professionals, who provide important inputs on a range of appropriate health issues to the young women across all of the ELBs;
- ▷ the excellent advice and information on a range of social security benefits, including a personal benefit check, for every SAM participant, by the Advice and Information Worker, who serves the Barnardo's Young Parents' Network;

- ▷ the effectiveness of the Regional Co-ordinator and Development worker under Barnardo's management, in providing support to project workers and ensuring consistency in practice across the Province; and
- ▷ the resolution of difficulties relating to the provision of childcare across all of the ELBs, including the introduction of the Care to Learn (Northern Ireland) Scheme by DEL in August 2004, to provide childcare support for 16, 17 and 18 year old parents in the Further Education sector. The DE is also developing a Care to Learn scheme to standardise arrangements for the provision of childcare for those attending school.

6. THE AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

6.1 This survey has identified a number of areas for improvement, including:

- ▷ the lack of strategic leadership from DE in terms of policy and planning of the provision for school aged mothers. This was reflected in inconsistent approaches to the resourcing of the SAM projects across the ELBs;
- ▷ undue variation in practice across the schools of the school aged mothers surveyed;
- ▷ insufficient capacity within all schools to ensure their ability to provide ongoing support to young pregnant pupils and young parents;
- ▷ inadequate qualitative and quantitative information on the educational attainments of the participants of the SAM programmes as they take up the provision and as they leave it, to identify key achievements of the pupils;
- ▷ inconsistencies in the learning experiences, and a lack of accreditation opportunities, for those young women who are

not in school and who are attending alternative education projects;

- ▷ inconsistent approaches to SAM, across the ELBs, in relation to: transport; home tuition, the provision of support for young women at post-16 level in Further Education or Training, resulting in some young women being disadvantaged because of where they live;
- ▷ the current funding arrangements, which lead to insecurity for the projects, and uncertainty for both the young women and staff involved in them, and the absence of recurrent funding to facilitate longer term planning;
- ▷ inconsistent approaches to staffing across the ELBs, with recruitment from a range of professional groups, such as social work, youth work and teaching, leading to inequities in salary structures;
- ▷ the uncertainty of ongoing support for young women who are pregnant or young parents, to ensure their continued involvement in education and training; and
- ▷ the absence of agreed good practice standards including a curriculum entitlement for each pupil.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 The DE, in collaboration with the ELBs and Health and Social Services professionals should promote an integrated, joint Departmental response to the needs of school aged mothers across all the ELB areas. This should include clear guidance for ELBs and schools, as well as joint training for staff, joint working and the joint delivery of a range of supports.
- 7.2 There is need for a management information system, perhaps linked to the existing Educational Welfare Service (EWS) system, to track the impact of the SAM provision and to monitor the educational progress of school aged mothers.

- 7.3 Statutory services should seek to develop partnerships among schools in local areas, and between the schools and the Health and Social Services. The involvement of the EWS is recognised as pivotal to the SAM projects and, as such, their role should be clarified to ensure their continued involvement.
- 7.4 There is a need to develop a pool of specialist staff, in relation to the needs of the school aged mothers, within and across the ELBs, so that they can provide advice and training to relevant professionals and to whom young mothers can be referred who experience more complex needs.

APPENDIX

LETTER FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (25 SEPTEMBER 2000)

Department of Education

To: Head of Pastoral Care
All Grant-aided Secondary Schools
with female pupils

25 September 2000

Dear Colleague

PASTORAL CARE IN SCHOOLS : PREGNANT SCHOOLGIRLS AND SCHOOL AGE MOTHERS

Along with this letter you will find a copy of 'Circles and Hoops - Information for Young Parents' which you may find useful in providing advice to female pupils in your pastoral care role. The pack was published recently by a consortium of agencies - Barnardo's, Gingerbread, Save the Children and the Housing Executive - concerned about the need for accessible and concise information for young parents on a range of issues.

The Department, in collaboration with colleagues in the Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, prepared the section on 'Education'. The information in this section reflects a policy framework for service development agreed in 1997. The framework has as its underpinning principle that the best place for the continued education of a pregnant school girl or school age mother is in school, and that all support should be directed towards facilitating her to complete compulsory education and remain in education beyond Year 12 if this is appropriate. This framework envisages the first source of support being the pastoral care teacher in school, and then a named Education Welfare Officer being the contact point for support from the Education and Library Board and for working with other agencies on the young woman's behalf.

You will be aware that there is concern among all agencies, statutory and voluntary, about the increased numbers of teen parents and, in particular, the longer term impact on the life chances of early parenthood on the young mother and her baby. The Department and colleagues through the education sector are very aware of the importance of improving educational attainment for these young women as a vital element in preventing social exclusion. The Department hopes to commission a pastoral care guide for schools on supporting pregnant schoolgirls and school age mothers during the course of this school year.

If you require any further information about support arrangements within your area, please ask the Education Welfare Officer for your school. Additional copies of 'Circles and Hoops' can... be had on request from the Department's Pupil Support Unit at 028 9127 9749.

Yours sincerely



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