

# Evaluation of a project giving boarding school places to young people living in difficult situations

A summary of findings for young people

January 2009

## What was the evaluation for?

In November 2006 the government began a project in 10 local areas in England to see if boarding school might be a possible option for children and young people who could no longer stay all the time with their parents or carers or who were facing difficulties such as not attending school and not getting on with their families. The evaluation took place to find out more about:

- The things that worked well about the project
- In what ways some young people could benefit from going to boarding school
- The things that could make the project work better.

The evaluation also aimed to help the government decide whether to extend the project to other parts of England.

## Who did the research?

Claire Maxwell, Elaine Chase, June Statham and Sonia Jackson at the Thomas Coram Research Unit, part of the Institute of Education at the University of London.

## How was the research done?

The research involved:

- Finding out about young people who went to boarding school as part of the project and how things worked out.
- Talking with young people who went to boarding school under the project
  - Talking with these young people's parents and carers.
  - Talking with people responsible for the care and support of young people (such as social workers and managers of children's services)
  - Talking with people in the local area who were responsible for organising and managing the project
  - Asking head teachers of boarding schools who were part of the project to complete a questionnaire
  - Collecting information from educational charities (Trusts) which have helped fund some of the boarding school places.

## What did we find?

- During the twenty-two months of the project, the 10 areas taking part thought about offering a boarding school place to a total of 76 young people. Sometimes, it was decided very early on that boarding school would not suit the young person and the idea was dropped. At other times the young person (or their family) decided they did not want to go to boarding school. Sometimes the other difficulties the young person was facing got sorted out and they did not need a place at boarding school.

- Seventeen young people actually started at a boarding school under the project, and 11 were still at the school when the evaluation ended in September 2008. Young people still in boarding school talked about how they had learned a lot and benefitted educationally and socially from being in boarding school. Here are just some of the things that young people and their parents said:

*"There are so many things to do here."*  
(Lauren)

*"Boarding school has been a major good thing in my life."*  
(Frankie)

*"She has become an A\* pupil. I went to parents' evening in November (six months into the placement) and they said 'she's a fantastic student'. She's thoughtful, conciliatory, she's happy. It's amazing, it's lovely to see her doing all the things she liked doing before again like singing, doing drama."*  
(Mother)

*"At first I thought 'what are my friends going to say about me', but it's fine. At the time I wanted to go to the (local) High school but I don't think I would have lasted there."*  
(Josh)

- Even though the project had started quite slowly, the systems were now in place so that it was starting to become easier to identify young people who might benefit from a boarding school placement and get them into a school as early as possible. A good time to do this seemed to be when they moved from primary to secondary school.

## Why did some placements work well and others not?

For most of the young people included in the evaluation, boarding school had helped them with difficulties they had been facing at home and at school. These are some of the ways in which boarding school was said to have helped them:

*"Mum said that she's going to miss me when I go back... normally she can't wait to get rid of me' I am a lot happier now and I get on better with mum. We can have a laugh now, it's a much better relationship. I love having her around and before I wished she was dead. And that's because of going to school and getting my life sorted."*  
(Sarah)

*"If she had not gone to boarding school she would have been taken into care. There was an accumulation of problems which meant she couldn't stay with either parent for a prolonged period of time."*  
(Social worker)

*"I prefer her to be in boarding school than in foster care because my heart gets wrenched more if she's in foster care. In boarding school you can keep the parent-child relationship going, there isn't the involvement of a third party."*  
(Mother)

*"This school has basically like changed my life like if you know what I mean. I used to have someone from social services come and take me out every day, every single day just to get me out of the house."*  
(Julie)

The things that seemed to affect how well young people coped with boarding school included: attitudes of young people and parents to boarding school (some had never even thought about boarding school before so they had to keep an open mind about it); how confident young people felt and their own personality and social skills; and whether they wanted to be at school and in education.

*"I know that the young person has to have some aspiration. Some young people wouldn't last. They have to want to make a change."*  
(Social worker)

In addition, it was really important that young people were well prepared for boarding school and that they had a chance to try it out before making their decision.

*"Before I went, I visited the school for a day. And then I came back and then stayed a night or two...and still then I thought 'No'. So then I stayed a week and I am still here!"*  
(Jasmine)

*"The initial visit to school, including meeting the Head, was out of term time – so Tom wasn't able to visit the dormitories as they were locked. We didn't do enough work around his anxieties about leaving his family for boarding school - he has never lived away from home - and we didn't show him boarding in action."*  
(Education key worker)

While many of the boarding schools had experience of working with young people from many different backgrounds and situations, we found that sometimes young people had needs that schools had not come across before. When this happened, it made it more difficult for the young person to stay in boarding school. Making sure that young people were placed in the right type of boarding school is therefore very important.

The project was set up to offer a boarding school place to children and young people facing a range of difficulties. We found that it is important to find out about the problems that young people are facing and think about boarding school as an option as early as possible. In order to do this, all sorts of different people working with young people need to know about the possibility of boarding school and be able to suggest it as an option to young people when appropriate.

## What did local areas think about boarding school as an option for young people?

Most of the 10 local areas saw boarding school as an option that they could talk to young people and their families about when considering how best to help them. Six of the areas felt by the end of the evaluation the arrangements were in place to offer boarding school as an option to young people facing difficulties. Three areas thought they still had some work to do but that boarding school would soon become an option for more young people. Only one area thought that boarding school would not suit the young people and families that they worked with (because of the lack of boarding schools in their area, and because few families had experience of such schools). All the areas thought that it was important to convince young people, their families and other professionals that boarding school was not just for people from wealthy backgrounds.

## What did we say should happen as a result of the project evaluation?

Based on the information we gathered and the discussions we had with young people, parents and people working in local areas, schools and education trusts, these are some of the recommendations that we made:

- Boarding school should be considered as a placement option for children and young people who are facing particular difficulties at home and/or at school.
- All sorts of people are well placed to identify young people facing difficulties who might benefit from going to boarding school. This includes teachers, social workers, nurses, doctors, counsellors, Connexions workers, youth workers, people in the youth offending service, voluntary organisations and others. In local areas, these people need to work closely together to help place young people who might benefit from boarding school
- Boarding school seems to be most successful when young people are allowed to make the decision themselves to go to boarding school and when they have all the information they need to help them make this decision and to choose a school.
- Local areas need to think very carefully about the best way to prepare children/young people and their families for boarding school life. They also need to think about how to support young people and their families during the holidays.

The Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) is a multi-disciplinary research unit within the Institute of Education, University of London. Founded in 1973 by Professor Jack Tizard, its principal function is to carry out research of relevance to the health and wellbeing of children, young people and families.

Thomas Coram Research Unit  
Institute of Education  
27-28 Woburn Square  
London WC1H 0AA

Tel: 020 7612 6958  
Fax: 020 7612 6927  
Email: [tcru@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:tcru@ioe.ac.uk)  
Website: [www.ioe.ac.uk/tcru](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/tcru)