

Advisory Centre for Education (ACE)



Funding needed: £50,000 per annum for at least three years
Potential impact: Low ←————→ High
Risk: Low ←————→ High
Difficulty of fundraising: Low ←————→ High

- Independent advice and support on education matters is a vital resource for parents
- ACE provides thousands of parents each year with high quality advice
- Funding could secure and expand its helplines, training and lobbying
- NPC recommends funders support ACE's invaluable work

Issue: Independent advice and support on education matters is a vital resource for parents

More than 10,500 children are permanently excluded from school each year, while over 240,000 receive a fixed period exclusion. There are many risk factors for exclusion, ranging from domestic problems to learning difficulties. Two thirds of exclusions involve children with special educational needs.



Many of these children are not receiving the support they need prior to exclusion, and are not receiving adequate information upon exclusion, which is associated with low educational attainment, poor job prospects, poor health, crime and imprisonment.

When threatened with exclusion, the only advice available to pupils or their parents comes from the school itself. As a result, limited information may be given out and this is seldom trusted. Given the vested interests, advice can also be wrong. Therefore, there is a crucial need for guidance and information from an independent body.

Case study

Kyle, 13, had received seven fixed period exclusions since the start of the school year for 'behaving unreasonably,' although he had not been in trouble before.

ACE's helpline staff investigated the reasons behind Kyle's poor behaviour. ACE discovered that Kyle's parents had broken up. The younger children were living with Kyle's mother, leaving Kyle with his grandparents. He felt very unhappy and angry about the situation.

The adviser suggested that Kyle's grandfather inform the school about Kyle's circumstances and ask them to arrange support for Kyle, such as counselling and anger management training. Kyle's grandfather used the government guidance in the exclusion pack ACE sent him. He was able to have a positive meeting with school staff, and Kyle was not permanently excluded.

Response: ACE provides thousands of parents each year with high quality advice

The Advisory Centre for Education (ACE) was established in 1960 as an independent national advice centre for parents. The charity monitors government guidance on exclusions and acts as a watchdog. It is unique in offering advice in England and Wales on state education law and giving information about how parents can act as advocates for their children. The charity provides the following services:

- Providing information for parents through a number of helplines, a website and information packs. In 2004, the four helplines took over 5,700 calls, the website received over 130,000 visits and almost 30,000 information packs were sent to parents and professionals.
- Training professionals and members of community organisations through the Education Step-by-Step programme. This enables them to give education advice to people who may not access ACE's advice lines, which is particularly important for reaching black and minority ethnic communities. 90 professionals were trained in 2003/04, while an additional 350 received ongoing support. Each adviser helps an average of 30 families a year.
- Lobbying government on its policies regarding exclusions and special educational needs. ACE also aims to influence organisations and institutions such as the media to report on exclusions in a more balanced manner.

ACE's income is almost £580,000 per annum. Twelve full-time and six part-time staff members deliver the services. ACE has a growing income from its publications and training services, but continues to rely on private funding for day-to-day activities. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) endorses ACE and funds around 60% of the advice and exclusion helplines. However, funds this year were late, creating significant difficulties for the charity.

Results: Funding could secure and expand its helplines, training and lobbying

ACE has received the Quality Mark from the Legal Services Commission for the high standard of its advice. As a result of government recognition of its valuable service, its contact details are included in schools' letters to parents notifying them that their child has been excluded.

ACE monitors the impact on a sample of families it advises through follow-up calls. These calls have identified a range of positive results:

- For parents, these include understanding of issues, laws and remedies; increased confidence to tackle difficult issues; advocacy for children at tribunals and appeals; better, more equal communication with school; and empathy in a stressful situation.
- For children, these include successful continuation of their education after problems have been resolved; an unfair exclusion being overturned; proper educational provision being made after an exclusion; causes of school phobia and truancy being addressed; and challenges to discrimination on the grounds of disability or ethnic origin. Over three quarters of callers take further action following their call to ACE.

Other initiatives in 2004 included: briefing and lobbying MPs on the revised Exclusion Regulations; ensuring that a major flaw in a proposed revision to exclusions guidance was corrected; and raising with the DfES conflicts and problems in the law on exclusions appeals and disability discrimination.

ACE's resources are limited, which affects its service delivery. For example, the helplines can only be manned from 2-5pm, Monday to Friday, which means around 50% of callers encounter difficulties in getting through. ACE's advice costs around £90 per family accessing the helpline. The cost per user is likely to be much lower, given the charity's policy and training work. Exclusions are on the rise, particularly in the light of government's 'zero tolerance' approach, which indicates that the need for ACE's services will grow in the near future.

'The advice from ACE is clearly making a difference in the lives of parents facing difficulties in their children's education by improving their knowledge and confidence and ultimately serving to help improve the general situation of those contacting them.'

Evaluation of ACE's general advice line by independent consultant

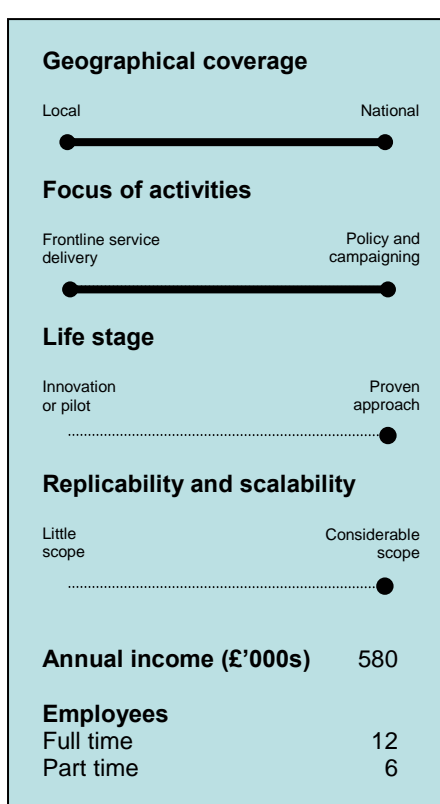
'The rapport with the school has been so much better since I spoke to ACE.'
Parent

'ACE made me feel as though I wasn't on my own. I had thought the whole system was stacked against me. Now I have someone who will help me.'

Parent

'The Step-by-Step training has had a dramatic effect on my confidence in giving education advice.'

Trainee



Recommendation: NPC recommends funders support ACE's invaluable work

In the current climate, where exclusions are on the rise, education provision following an exclusion varies according to region and is often unclear. The role of ACE as an information provider, and as the sole body lobbying government on this issue, is extremely important. Greater involvement by parents, based upon accurate information, is helpful for children and should mean that relations between parents and schools or local education authorities are less confrontational.

ACE has difficulty fundraising, in part because the subject area it covers is unappealing to many funders. Examples of how private funding could help build on the impact achieved to date include:

- £20,000 could enable a staff member to collect information which both ensures their advice is up-to-date and informs their lobbying.
- £30,000 could fund the updating of ACE's training materials, which enable community organisations to reach more families. Initial training is updated for free, through a helpline and seminars. ACE also provides free training to small charities working with disadvantaged groups where possible.
- £50,000 could fund the remaining costs needed to maintain the independence of the helplines, .

The risks involved in funding ACE are low. Although the charity does not follow up on all calls, the sampling undertaken each year demonstrates the positive results of its advice. ACE is well-respected in this field and has proven success in lobbying government on its exclusions policy.

For more information on truancy and exclusion see our report: **'School's out?': Truancy and Exclusion, at www.philanthropycapital.org**