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Empowering teachers, parents and communities to achieve excellence and equity – A governance review

Deputy First Minister, John Swinney
Statement to Parliament
13 September, 2016

Last week in this Chamber the First Minister spoke about the defining mission of this Government: delivering excellence and equity in education.

Excellence - we will raise the bar for all; and Equity - we will close the attainment gap.

And we have put specific timescales against our work on the attainment gap. We will make significant progress within this parliament and substantially eliminate that gap by the end of the next Parliament.

Presiding Officer, we have set ourselves the task of ensuring that every child - no matter where they are from or how well off their family is - has the same opportunities and an equal chance to succeed.

Avis Glaze – the world renowned educationalist who now sits on our International Council of Education Advisers – put it simply:

“Poverty is not destiny.”

Our task is to make sure that is the case in Scotland.

And we have made a strong start.

We have expanded our Attainment Challenge to £750 million over the life of this parliament, providing direct support to those schools with the biggest attainment gap challenge.

We have introduced the new National Improvement Framework. Standardised assessment will be introduced to inform teacher judgment about the performance of young people. And new, transparent, reporting on school performance will allow us to measure the attainment gap more accurately and set clear targets for closing it.

We have also moved decisively to free teachers to teach by removing unnecessary bureaucracy and workload.

We have provided a definitive statement of priorities for Scotland’s schools setting out clearly and concisely what teachers should and shouldn’t be focusing on. It will empower them to spend their time teaching and giving our children the best possible opportunities to learn.

These are strong foundations for Scottish education.

In its review of Scottish education, the OECD found Scotland is above the international average in reading and science; that attainment is improving; that Scotland’s schools are inclusive; and that our children are resilient and have positive attitudes towards school.

This is a testament to the bold reform of Curriculum for Excellence and the energy applied by many to ensure success for Scotland’s young people.

But the OECD also told us to continue to be bold.

Andy Hargreaves of the OECD Review team set out the challenge at the recent Education Summit, telling us “not only to remain ahead of the global curve in education but actually become the curve that others will refer to around the world”.

We accept that challenge.

We will create the world leading education system our children and young people deserve.

Presiding Officer, our next step in that challenge is to ask ourselves, how should school education be run? That is what our Governance Review will seek to answer over the coming months.

But we do not ask that question in a vacuum.

Today I will set out our vision for the most critically important part of our early years and school education system – our teachers, practitioners and their relationship with our children.

That relationship is at the heart of every story of success. In every school that succeeds, you find great teachers able to reach out and touch the lives of the children in their classrooms.

In every story of a child lifted out of poverty by the power of education, you find teachers and the bond they formed with that child.

Nothing is more critical.

And, in the 118 days since becoming Education Secretary, I have been deeply impressed by the excellent work I have seen from teachers and early years practitioners across the country.

But, I have also heard about the barriers and challenges they face to delivering great education.

So, our guiding principle for the way our schools are run is simple.

Decisions should be taken at school level.

That will be our presumption and we will place it at the heart of this review.

We want to empower our teachers – and our early years workers - to make the best decisions for children and young people. They have the expertise we need. They are the professionals charged with using the power of education to change a child's destiny. We will place them at the heart of a system that makes decisions about children's learning and school life within the schools themselves, supported by parents and the local community.

Presiding Officer, this is a vision of empowerment and devolution. Devolution from local authorities to schools – teachers, headteachers, parents and communities. Devolution from a national to a local or regional level. Let us ensure that decisions about a child's learning are taken as close to a child as possible.

Devolution of decision making has to be allied to devolution of resources. We have begun this process with the allocation of £100m from Council Tax reform directly to schools to support their work to close the equity gap.

But, we are committed to go much further. We are committed to establishing a fair and transparent needs based funding formula for schools. We will consult on proposals for a funding formula in March 2017 but this review offers an opportunity to comment on how funding can be made fairer and support decision making by teachers at a school level.

Presiding Officer we know that improvement in education is driven by co-operation and collaboration not competition or marketisation.

This Government is committed to a publicly funded comprehensive education system which enables every child and young person to achieve.

We will not – we will never – go down the divisive academy model.

And, we will never allow children to be labelled as failures at the age of eleven. There will be no policy of selection or Grammar Schools in Scotland.

Our reform will be based on evidence of what works not right-wing ideological dogma.

The evidence shows that systematic collaborative engagement at every level of education is what builds capacity and delivers the best outcomes for children and young people.

School clusters are a way in which schools can work together and we want to hear how this type of collaboration and others can be encouraged so that it is supported and sustained.

By working together we can achieve more. We will not set school against school, parent against parent and pupil against pupil. We will bring people together to pursue the world-class education that every child deserves.

Presiding Officer, I have set out our presumption that decisions should be taken at school level. There will inevitably be some elements of our system that will have to be the responsibility of other organisations. The question the review poses is what elements and where should those responsibilities sit?

Sometimes the answer will be obvious: for example, there will always be the need for a national exams body. No one would suggest schools should set their own Highers. But there are some elements that will be a matter of genuine debate

Some of the support schools need is best delivered at a local or a regional level. Currently many of these services are delivered by local authorities.

Let me be clear local authorities will continue to exercise democratic control over Scottish education at a local level. But we must question how the role of local government can become more effective. Devolving responsibilities to our schools means we need to question the support provided at every level of our education system to ensure it delivers what teachers need.

Whilst there are some examples of partnership working across local authorities, the OECD highlighted the need for more effective partnership and collaboration by them.

This Government will therefore introduce new educational regions to ensure good practice is shared across education and to ensure we deliver best value. The governance review offers the opportunity to shape these.

Local authorities are accountable to their electorates. I am accountable to the electorate and to this Chamber. Schools should primarily be accountable to parents and their local communities.

We need a system of accountability – a system of governance - which is clear to parents, teachers and communities – to every one of us whether we have a formal role in our education system or a stake in its success.

The Governance Review is our opportunity to make that a reality. I want to hear views from across every part of Scotland in the weeks and months ahead. I want to hear from children and young people, from parents, teachers, practitioners and the wider community.

There will be opportunities to engage directly with the questions in the review and on-line. We will be publishing information about engagement events on our website

and these will take place across the country.

I will also meet monthly with my counterpart in COSLA Cllr Stephanie Primrose during the course of the review, to share emerging findings and build consensus where possible. I plan to spend a significant amount of time over the next 3 months talking and listening to teachers, children and young people and partners about how education is run. Presiding Officer, I want to hear from members of this Chamber and I invite every member of this Parliament to engage and contribute to this review.

Closing the attainment gap and raising standards for all – delivering excellence and equity for all of our children and young people – is our national mission. We are ready to take the next steps in making Scotland’s school education world-class. I invite everyone in this chamber to join us in that effort.

ENDS