COMMISSION
ON SCHOOL
REFORM

CHALLENGE PAPER 1:

RAISING ATTAINMENT AND CLOSING THE GAP

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Membership of the re-convened Commission on School Reform is as follows:

- **Keir Bloomer (Chair):** Education Consultant and former Director of Education
- **Sarah Atkin:** Currently works in a secondary school, formerly a Parent Council Chair and researcher for education conferences. Labour Party member
- **John Barnett:** Scotland Manager at An Ethical Bank and former Parent Council Chairman
- **Jamie Cooke:** Head of RSA Scotland
- **Frank Lennon:** Head of Dunblane High School
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- **Cllr Paul McLennan:** SNP Councillor in East Lothian
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The Scottish Government has set itself the objectives of raising attainment for all young people and simultaneously closing the gap between the levels of attainment of children from deprived and more affluent backgrounds. The Commission shares these objectives but questions whether there are effective strategies in place to achieve them.

Background

Evidence from examination results suggests that levels of attainment in Scotland have been rising at a noticeable although not rapid pace over a sustained period. However, international surveys indicate that

Scotland's standing has decline relative to many other countries. In short, standards may be improving but they are doing so relatively slowly.

Successive governments have tried to narrow the attainment gap. Over a period of fifty years policies ranging from introducing comprehensive secondary schooling to Curriculum for Excellence have shared this objective. However, there is little evidence of success. Overall standards have risen but the gap in performance between disadvantaged children and others remains.

The government has thus set itself ambitious, if rather unspecific, objectives. Has it put in place strategies that are likely to yield success?

What would success look like?

What gap are we talking about? Disparity in levels of attainment is evident at all stages of education. The government appears most concerned about differences in performance at Higher with far fewer disadvantaged young people gaining three passes than their more affluent peers. This is certainly an important measure although one that appears to place a greater value on academic than vocational learning.

Should we not be equally concerned about the gap that has already appeared before children enter primary school? There is obviously a case for narrowing all gaps but greater precision in the government's target(s) would affect how resources should be directed and which strategies should be adopted.

How fast should standards rise? What level of performance would be seen as acceptable, and over what timescale? Would it, for example, be seen as a success if Scotland were to come in the top quartile in the PISA survey of 2018?

How rapidly should the attainment gap shrink? Would, say, a reduction of 25% by the end of the decade be seen as sufficient progress?

In the absence of specific answers, we are left to guess. It seems likely that the government intends that Scottish education should be amongst the best in the world within at most ten years. In the same period it would clearly wish to make much progress in closing the gap than over the past half century. If these are not the kind of targets the government has in mind, the public should be told.

Imprecise as these suggested objectives are, they give us some idea of the pace of improvement required. If Scotland is to become one of the world's best performing systems within a small number of years, the current rate of improvement will have to be increased substantially. If, at the same time, the gap is to be narrowed without any adverse impact on the best-performing, the rate of improvement among the currently poorly-performing will need to be of a different order of magnitude to anything being achieved at present. While it is good to be ambitious, there is no evidence to suggest that what is being attempted is feasible.

It is important to be aware that different strategies are likely to be required to raise standards overall from those that are most effective in closing the gap. The experience of past decades suggests that policies designed to help the disadvantaged have often proven

even more effective with other learners. This, of course, is not a reason to neglect such policies but it is a reason for seeking out approaches that will be especially beneficial to those in particular need. The government needs to seek out such approaches and make sure that schools can get advice and support in implementing them.

Whereas improved classroom practice can raise standards for all, disadvantaged young people will require forms of support that are additional, carefully targeted and highly personalised. Traditional patterns of school organisation have not catered well for such approaches. Providing effectively for all learners and simultaneously taking the kind of measures needed to narrow the gap will call for radical innovations in the way learning is organised, teacher time is used and resources are allocated. Has sufficient thought been given to this? How does the government propose to support schools in making such changes, particularly at a time when additional resources are not available?

The Commission is convinced that success in motivating and supporting disadvantaged learners depends on the quality of the relationships established between teachers and learners and between schools and parents. Many schools pay great attention to this issue but others do not. It is essential that both local and central government should make improving school ethos and the quality of relationships a high priority.

Empowering schools

In its 2013 report, the Commission devoted much space to arguing the case for greater school autonomy. Research by OECD demonstrates that systems with high levels of autonomy tend to fare better than others. Autonomy promotes initiative and innovation. It secures greater commitment from staff to make necessary change. It allows dialogue among schools, parents and young people to be more productive. Schools can see themselves as more directly accountable to those to whom they already feel most responsible; families, young people and the local community.

Scotland's schools enjoy greater devolved powers than those in many other countries. During the 1990s considerable progress was made in terms of allowing schools greater say in relation to making staff appointments and some measure of control over budgets. However, budgetary empowerment is often more apparent than real. Schools have notional control over a high proportion of expenditure but their level of discretion is low. They cannot vary staffing standards (other than within narrow limits) and are obliged to make use of local authority procurement and other services. Discretion they were given in relation to flexibility in the curriculum has largely disappeared under Curriculum for Excellence. Headteachers lack the power to take strategic decisions and embrace radical innovation. In other words, the empowering impetus of the 1990s stalled before it became truly meaningful. Since then little more has been done.

It is clear that these current governance arrangements are not bringing about systemic improvement at the pace that is required. Does the government have any plans for reviewing them? Does it share the Commission's view that empowering schools, significantly beyond the extent to which this is claimed to be happening through Curriculum for Excellence, is a vital component of any improvement structure that is likely to prove effective?

Effective change mechanisms

In the opinion of the Commission meeting the government's objectives will call for much more effective mechanisms for bringing about change than those that have been employed in Scottish education up to the present time.

It will not do to point to existing policies such

as school self-evaluation (in which Scotland is certainly a leader), *Teaching Scotland's Future or Curriculum for Excellence*. Admirable as these are, they have not delivered the pace of change required. This is not to suggest they should be abandoned, but something more is required.

So far, the government appears to have been more active in relation to closing the gap than in raising standards across the board. It has set up a fund worth around £25m a year, to finance initiatives in the seven local authority areas with the greatest concentrations of deprivation and in fifty-seven primary schools serving deprived areas in fourteen other authorities. There is, as yet, no programme directed at those children living in poverty but attending schools that do not serve particularly deprived areas. The recent Rowntree research suggests that these may be the majority of all children experiencing deprivation. This is, therefore, a very substantial gap in current policy.

The nature of these initiatives is highly traditional. Their focus appears to be mainly on inputs; investing more money or engaging more staff. Yet experience has shown that it is dangerous to assume that an increase in inputs will automatically produce an improvement in outcomes. Effective change in outcomes depends more on how resources are used. The seven local authorities have been required to produce plans. Attainment advisers have been appointed. But, how are schools to receive advice and support in tackling the problems they are actually experiencing?

Even more importantly, what is being done to encourage initiative and innovation at local level? The role of the local authority is crucial and, therefore, the challenges in this paper are addressed to them as well as to central government. What changes in the process of schooling does the local authority wish to see take place? Does the authority have the information needed to know if progress is being made? For example, does it measure whether all teachers are fully conversant the principles of formative assessment or whether their practice reflects the notion of 'active learning' as required in *Curriculum for Excellence*?

The same considerations apply to an even greater extent in relation to raising standards generally. How are schools and local authorities to be helped to select the best approaches? How are they to be supported in carrying them into effect? Is Education Scotland equipped to carry out this task or are there better means by which schools could be supported?

Has the government considered that its aspirations are so ambitious that for schools simply to do the same sort of thing better may not be enough? It may be that improvement will not suffice and that transformational change will be required, involving radical new approaches to governance, school organisation and pedagogy. What plans exist to encourage this kind of approach?

How will government respond if local authorities or individual schools wish to introduce new forms of school governance, different pedagogical approaches or radically new models of school organisation? The answer to this question will give a strong indication of whether there is yet a willingness to embrace the diversity and the empowering of schools that effective processes of change require.

The Commission's 2013 report[1], *By Diverse Means*, devoted much attention to how change is best brought about in a complex system like school education. It concluded that ten conditions would need to be put in place:

- clarity of purpose and roles
- securing commitment
- incentives
- increased diversity

[1] The report can be accessed using the following link https://reformscotland.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/bydiversemeans1.pdf

- school autonomy and empowerment of staff
- appropriate governance arrangements
- effective support
- leadership capacity
- management information and evidence base
- investment in people.

Progress has been made in some of these areas. For example, attention is being given to building leadership capacity while budgets for professional development – investing in people – have been protected in a period of great financial difficulty to a greater extent than might have been anticipated. But what has happened about promoting school autonomy, reviewing governance arrangements, securing commitment to change or several other critical requirements?

The Commission believes that much remains to be done. Unless the issue of developing effective change mechanisms is tackled, it is hard to see how standards will be raised or the gap narrowed at an acceptable pace.

Targeting resources effectively

Patterns of spending in Scottish education owe more to history than to active choice.

Much research demonstrates the value of investing in education in early years and, indeed, the Scottish Government has been active in this area. However, the level of spend and the qualifications of staff employed in this field both require to be raised.

Similarly, the disparity of spending on primary and secondary education is justified more in terms of the less cost-effective pattern of school organisation in secondary than because of any intellectually defensible rationale. Making changes would necessarily be a gradual process but the preliminary step of reviewing the current arrangements and determining whether they represent the optimum pattern for achieving the government's strategic priorities has yet to be started.

With regard to tackling disadvantage, there is an even more urgent need to review what resources are available, how they are distributed and how their impact is measured. It now seems likely that the amount being devoted to this priority in Scotland is less than south of the border and that the targeting is less effective. In Scotland, quite limited resources are distributed to schools in areas of deprivation but with little attempt being made to ensure that they are then used for the benefit of the children in greatest need.

The Commission would hope that, at the very least, the allocation of resources by government and local authorities is reviewed urgently to ensure that a worthwhile resource follows these children and has to be used by schools for their direct benefit.

This need not involve traditional approaches such as increasing teacher numbers. It should be for schools to decide how best to use resources and they should be judged (and where appropriate, rewarded) on the basis of the subsequent impact on the success of disadvantaged children.

The most important resource in schools is teacher time. When *Curriculum for Excellence* was first conceived, there was much discussion of the need to liberate teacher time by 'decluttering' the curriculum. Assessment was not to be allowed to dominate the curriculum. In the interim, there has been an initiative on tackling bureaucracy. However, there is little evidence of teacher workload being well managed. Complaints over excessive demands related to accountability and assessment are very widespread.

What steps will be taken to ensure that teacher time is used for greatest benefit of learners? How will workload be managed more effectively? How will time be focused to the maximum extent on activities that will help to raise standards and narrow the gap?

Ensuring that appropriate professional development and support is in place

As a result of the Donaldson Report, *Teaching, Scotland's Future*, Scotland has in place a comprehensive framework for teacher professional development. Since August 2014, engagement in the Professional Update process has been a requirement for registration with GTC Scotland whose suite of professional standards include the Standard for Full Registration, the Standard for Career-Long Professional Learning and the Standard for Leadership and Management. It is important that priority is now given to development opportunities that will increase capacity to tackle issues of deprivation and to raise attainment more generally.

Much of the professional development already available is concerned with, for example, improving pedagogy or with formative assessment. Such CPD is clearly relevant to raising attainment generally. It is less clear that good professional development is available that relates specifically to tackling deprivation. The need is, perhaps, most pressing in relation to the two groups of schools involved in the initiatives so far announced and for those taking part in any future initiatives. However, this is an area of expertise that all teachers require and the scale of investment must recognise this.

There are aspects of this support that should be at a high level of generality, dealing with issues such as the educational impact of deprivation and how it might be minimised. However, there is a need, at least as great, for more immediately practical advice. Lessons from elsewhere suggest that professional development needs to be linked to means for promoting mutual support among teachers and others involved. The use of professional learning communities is likely to be a feature of any successful support programme.

Some support will require to relate specifically to the approaches being used to reduce the impact of deprivation. It is not yet clear to what extent the choice of approaches will be made at national, local authority or school level. The Commission believes strongly that significant discretion should lie at school level. Regardless of whether that view is adopted, choices will have to be made.

There are several sources of reputable advice. The very extensive meta-research carried out by Hattie and his team at the University of Auckland has global significance. The recent Rowntree research is specifically concerned with the Scottish context. In addition, there are other sources that could usefully contribute. The Commission believes that all of these should be used in guiding schools in making their choices.

It also considers that the operation of Education Scotland requires to be reviewed. What schools and teachers most urgently require is an organisation that is there to meet their needs rather than advances a government agenda. A reputable source of advice and support in relation to the priorities of the profession would be highly valued. Currently, with local authority support structures greatly diminished, many teachers have nowhere to go for help. Turning Education Scotland into an organisation that met this need would be a major step forward. The symbolic importance of such an action should not be under-estimated.

Conclusion

Government has set out policy priorities with which few people will disagree. However, they are exceptionally ambitious. Timescales may well be unrealistic. The potential tension between raising standards for all and boosting the prospects of disadvantaged young people do not seem to have been fully explored. The rate of improvement that will be required calls for a pace of change that has never previously been generated in Scottish education.

The Commission is not persuaded that the strategies and support mechanisms that will be needed for success are yet in place.

Attention does not seem to have been given to developing effective change mechanisms. Making progress is, in the Commission's view entirely dependent on:

- Empowering schools to make decisions on how best to meet local needs and providing the information necessary to help them in decision-making
- Adopting effective change mechanisms
- Targeting resources effectively for the benefit of the child
- Ensuring that appropriate professional development and support is in place.

The Commission hopes that the government will review its current approaches with a view to ensuring that these prerequisites are in place.