

**COMMISSION
ON SCHOOL
REFORM**

**An Education Manifesto for
2021 and Beyond**

April 2021



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Membership of the Commission on School Reform is as follows:

- **Keir Bloomer (Chair):** Education Consultant and former Director of Education
- **John Barnett:** University Court Member, retired finance professional and former Parent Council Chairman
- **Helen Chambers:** Deputy Chief Executive of Inspiring Scotland
- **Jamie Cooke:** Head of RSA Scotland
- **Carole Ford:** Former head teacher
- **Jim Goodall:** Former Head of Education and Community Services at Clackmannanshire Council and current Lib Dem councillor at East Dunbartonshire Council
- **Anna Hazel-Dunn:** Headteacher, Royal High Primary
- **Frank Lennon:** Former head teacher of Dunblane High School
- **Cllr Paul McLennan:** SNP Councillor in East Lothian
- **Ross Martin:** Former school teacher, voluntary tutor, chair of local education authority, member of college board and university court.
- **Lindsay Paterson:** Professor of education policy in the School of Social and Political Science at Edinburgh University
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Please note that all members of the commission participate in an individual capacity and that the views of the commission do not represent the views of any other organisation to which the individual members belong.

This report is part of a series being produced by Reform Scotland and the Scottish Policy Foundation ahead of the Scottish parliament election on May 6, 2021

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- *Greater courage and appetite for risk among policy-makers.*

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Introduction

On the basis of the available evidence, Scottish school education is coasting. It lacks creativity and a capacity for innovation. Most, but by no means all, young people are able to take advantage of opportunities that are of good quality but not world-leading. This falls short of what our country should aspire to. It lacks the ambition of proclaimed aims such as improving standards for all while closing the attainment gap.

Culture and Governance

Under successive governments, a culture of compliance has developed, inhibiting innovation. As a result, the system lacks diversity and is not well-placed to learn either from its own experiences or the experiences of others.

Processes of change are not effective. Major programmes of reform deliver less than they promise and at a very high cost in terms of teacher workload. More than sixteen years after the publication of *Curriculum for Excellence*, it is difficult to see the kind of transformational change that the report envisaged.

Since devolution, control of education has become dangerously over-centralised. There is a need to reassert the role of local government. This has implications for education but goes beyond the scope of this paper. At the same time, there is a lack of any governance structure at school level, connecting schools to their communities and giving them access to support and expertise.

No government will succeed in making the educational improvements that are necessary unless it is prepared to make far-reaching changes in the way the system is run by challenging the coalition of vested interests that thrive in the current culture of complacency and conservatism.

The Commission on School Reform believes that necessary measures include:

- Greatly increased school autonomy, ensuring that critical decisions are taken by headteachers and school staff in close collaboration with other stakeholders but not subject to external reversal.
- A new Headteachers' Charter enshrining school control over the curriculum (subject only to a limited national strategy), staffing and the devolved school budget.
- An extensive programme of professional development designed to promote leadership and independent thinking.
- A government commitment to increased innovation and diversity with funding available to support credible programmes of change.
- A mandatory requirement on government to commission independent evaluations of all significant policy changes.
- Reform of teacher education and professional development, focused on raising standards and promoting professional qualities including the responsibility to offer constructive challenge to authority.
- A greater focus on professional development and career opportunities for other school-based staff.
- The introduction of 'partnership boards' with significant powers and broad stakeholder representation, including elected parents, to give each school access to a pool of local expertise and opinion.

Curriculum

Curricular policy is confused and, in important respects, deficient. The 2004 report, *Curriculum for Excellence*, established four objectives and seven curriculum principles at a very high level of generality. These have been widely applauded but frequently misunderstood. It is now clear that the implementation programme has been seriously flawed and that important changes are needed.

A review by the OECD will be published but not until after the election. Any incoming government will wish to take account of its conclusions and recommendations. However, there are other measures which will be required.

- A radical simplification and improvement of existing curricular guidance is needed. This will involve the withdrawal of much existing guidance. The aim must be a limited framework of high-quality strategic guidance that is easily understood and put into practice.
- A crucial element in the improvement of curricular guidance is the restoration of the place of knowledge in the process of learning.
- The traditional breadth of the S4 curriculum requires to be restored, allowing young people to study a larger number of subjects. This will require a recognition that prior learning contributes to certificated courses taken in S4.
- There is a need to review progression in the curriculum from early years to the senior phase so as to promote greater breadth in upper primary, improved transition to secondary, and greater coherence and less fragmentation in the early years of secondary education where the need for innovation is particularly evident.
- When reviewing the curriculum, the opportunity should be taken to strengthen the personal support and pastoral guidance available to young people, especially in the secondary sector.

These changes need to be accompanied by reforms in the way curricular policy is developed and schools are given access to support.

- Education Scotland should be abolished.
- An independent inspectorate should be established, overseen by a board independent of government influence and answerable to Parliament. The focus of the inspectorate's activities should be as much on the effectiveness of policy as on its implementation at the level of the individual school or other establishment.
- Strategic curriculum guidance should be developed collaboratively with extensive stakeholder involvement but should be seen clearly as the responsibility of government rather than a supposedly arms-length agency.
- Resources available for developing advice and delivering support should be progressively devolved to school level, allowing school staff to select those providers who they see as offering the best quality service.

Assessment and examinations

The operation of the Scottish Qualifications Agency has been strongly criticised during the period of lockdown. Some critics have gone as far as to suggest that formal examinations should be abolished entirely and replaced by assessments of coursework. The Commission believes that this would be profoundly mistaken. The objectivity of examinations and their freedom from plagiarism and outside help are of great value. A blend of different kinds of assessment has great merit.

The Commission believes that there are significant problems with the existing pattern of qualifications which means that many young people face examinations in three successive years, involving a ‘two-term dash’ in both S4 and S5. However, any credible reform will necessarily involve radical changes in the delivery of education in the senior phase of schooling and beyond. These could involve a raising of the minimum age for leaving education or training and a closer alignment of the later stages of secondary schooling with tertiary education.

- During the next Parliament, the system of qualifications in the senior phase of secondary education should be reviewed with the objectives of encouraging much greater coordination among schools, colleges and universities and reducing the frequency of examinations.

There are, however, also improvements to be made in the shorter term.

- Existing examination processes should be reviewed in order to improve their validity by reducing reliance on simple recall.
- It should be clarified that schools are entitled to secure examination and certification services from the supplier of their choice.

Vocational learning

Scottish school education has traditionally been more successful in relation to academic subjects than vocationally-oriented learning. At the same time, it has not been very successful in meeting the needs of disengaged learners, especially in the secondary years. A more flexible senior phase is a significant step forward which can pave the way for further progress.

- Collaboration among schools and other providers should be further encouraged and developed.
- Government should promote and fund alternative forms of provision – which may, or may not, involve school attendance – for disengaged learners.
- Where arrangements other than full-time school attendance are deemed appropriate, all funding should follow the young person.

Early years

The expansion of early-years provision has been a success story of recent years. There is good research evidence that high-quality services for very young children have the capacity to make an impact on the attainment gap. The need now, therefore, is to raise the quality of provision and to ensure that the most vulnerable children receive an appropriate service as soon as possible. An important part of this process will be raising the level of qualification of a significant part of the workforce. Both local authority and partnership nurseries should be led by people holding qualifications specifically relevant to education and care in the early years.

- A career structure and long-term professional development opportunities, accompanied by suitable incentives, need to be put in place for all staff working in early-years education and childcare, especially those entering with minimum qualifications.
- Funding should be made available to promote innovative child development services for vulnerable children for the period between post-natal health-related services and the point of access to early-years services.

Educational recovery

The Commission believes that the pandemic has had a disastrous impact on education and that urgent action is needed to support the learning of young people currently going through the education system. It is deeply concerned that the impact has been greatest on disadvantaged learners and that the attainment gap has significantly widened. Some of our suggested actions are for government but others can be determined at school level.

- A flexible system of additional support needs to put in place to enable educational recovery as quickly as possible. This could involve additional time in school, homework clubs, Saturday clubs and so forth.
- Tutor support should be made available on a generous basis, particularly to disadvantaged learners.
- Urgent steps require to be taken to ensure that learning at home and/or blended learning are far more effectively supported in any future emergency.
- The mechanisms and resources developed should be used to give additional support to those requiring it in the course of their normal schooling.
- The school year should be reorganised to create a more balanced pattern of holidays.

Research and data

Improving the education system requires good information and data. There are important gaps in Scotland's current arrangements.

- An independent body similar to the Office for National Statistics should be established to oversee the collection and analysis of statistics and data on Scottish education.
- Scotland should re-join the international TIMSS and PIRLS studies and consider whether there are other useful options for improving our knowledge of how performance in Scotland compares with elsewhere.
- Building on the experience of the now-defunct Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy and its predecessors, a new sample survey of performance in key areas of the curriculum at several stages of primary and early secondary education should be reintroduced.
- Better use should be made of the existing good-quality standardised tests by introducing consistency into the way in which they are administered with a view to obtaining data which has much greater validity.
- Educational innovations should be systematically and independently evaluated with findings being widely shared.