

Commission on School Reform

Behaviour in Schools

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by the behaviour of others.*



Membership of the Commission on School Reform is as follows:

- **Keir Bloomer (Chair):** Education Consultant and former Director of Education
- **Cllr Sarah Atkin:** Independent Councillor at The Highland Council and member of the Education Committee. Former Parent Council Chairwoman and School Governor.
- **John Edward:** Scottish Council on Global Affairs, Former Director SCIS; School Governor and Board Member of AGBIS.
- **Carole Ford:** Former head teacher of Kilmarnock Academy and former president of School Leaders Scotland
- **Heather Fuller:** Primary Headteacher at Jordanhill School, former Development Officer at Education Scotland
- **Jim Goodall:** Former Head of Education and Community Services at Clackmannanshire Council and former Lib Dem councillor at East Dunbartonshire Council
- **Anna Hazel-Dunn:** Deputy head teacher, Blackhall Primary, Edinburgh
- **Johann Lamont:** Former teacher (1979-99) and retired Member of Scottish Parliament (1999-2022)
- **Frank Lennon:** Former Head of Dunblane High School and St Modan's, Stirling
- **Darren Leslie:** Teacher in Fife and host of The Becoming Educated Podcast
- **Cllr Alix Mathieson:** Conservative Councillor at East Dunbartonshire Council, member of education committee and Former Chairperson of a third sector nursery
- **Lindsay Paterson:** Professor emeritus of education policy in the School of Social and Political Science at Edinburgh University.
- **Bruce Robertson:** An experienced secondary headteacher and best-selling author of The Teaching Delusion trilogy and Power Up Your Pedagogy: The Illustrated Handbook of Teaching.

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.

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A Growing Cause of Concern

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However, in recent years public concern about pupils' behaviour in schools has greatly increased. Press coverage has highlighted a growth in serious violence against other young people and staff, while behaviour problems regularly disrupt classes and prevent the well-behaved majority from learning in peace.

The NASUWT union claims that 44% of teachers responding to its survey had experienced physical abuse and/or violence in the year 2024/25 and 90% had been verbally abused. A local report on Edinburgh schools suggested that the incidence of pupils making abusive sexist comments to teachers increased from 22 in 2020/21 to 142 in 2024/25. Tom Bennett, an independent behavioural adviser to UK Department of Education has stated that behavioural problems are much greater in Scotland than England. He makes a link with persistent absence, pointing out that 19.2% of pupils in England have an absence rate greater than 10%, compared with 31.4% of Scottish pupils. Furthermore, the SSTA union claims that 92% of all lessons are interrupted by mobile phones. This clearly links to a finding that 43% of teachers find pupils withdrawing from proper classroom interactions on a daily basis.

The 2023 report of the Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research indicates numerous causes of concern. School staff reported that the most common forms of serious disruptive behaviours between pupils were physical and verbal abuse, particularly physical aggression, general verbal abuse and physical violence. Two-thirds of teachers (67%) had encountered general verbal abuse, 59% physical aggression and 43% physical violence between pupils in the classroom in the week before contributing to the research. In these circumstances it is not surprising that many of those leaving the profession have cited poor discipline as a reason for their departure. Although both primary and secondary school staff reported generally good behaviour among most or all pupils in the classroom (65%) and around the school (85%), these positive figures are lower than in the past.

For decades surveys have reported teachers as saying that persistent low-level misconduct such as persistent talking, lateness and misuse of phones is a more serious problem than the occasional crisis. This is almost certainly still the case in the majority of schools. However, there is a tipping point beyond which the frequency of crises becomes the dominating factor.

Behaviour issues take up time which could otherwise be devoted to teaching, such issues take up much of the time of pupil support staff. The CSR has already made clear its view that a review of pupil support systems is long overdue and that increased resources need to be devoted to this area of school activity. This review should include consideration of the causes and consequences of the increasing proportion of pupils having additional support needs (ASN). It must be recognised that pupil behaviour also takes up a very large part of senior management time and is a major cause of stress among teachers. The right of teachers to a supportive working environment deserves more attention than it generally receives.

It is widely believed that a deterioration in standards of behaviour has been evident for a considerable time but that the downward trend was accelerated by Covid. The same point is often made in relation to absence. It seems clear that the periods of lockdown in 2020 and 2021 have had a lasting negative impact on many pupils' attitudes to education. The same would seem to be true of an appreciable number of parents. The lack of any national post-Covid educational catch-up programme in Scotland seems to have confirmed them in the view that society no longer deems education to be as important as in the past.

At the same time, there has clearly been a loss of respect for education in some families. Support for teachers is not as strong as in the past. There is a greater tendency for parents to side with their children against the authority of the school. Although most families remain supportive and most pupils behave well, there has been a significant shift in a direction which makes the maintenance of good order in schools more problematic. Low-level disruption has always been a feature of many classrooms but its incidence is increasing and more serious misconduct is reaching worrying levels.

Poor behaviour has always had an adverse impact on learning. The current trend may soon result in that impact having serious consequences for the system as a whole.

Government Response and the Law

The Scottish Government has responded to concerns expressed by teachers, parents and the public at large. It has recognised the growing public concern and issued fresh guidance.

However, the issue by the Scottish Government in June 2025 of new guidance on the subject has not reassured teachers and, indeed, has provoked widespread public criticism. Its title, “Fostering a positive, inclusive and safe school environment”, indicates the approach taken. It follows on logically from the Relationships and behaviour in schools: national action plan 2024-27. In both documents the emphasis is on addressing the causes of bad behaviour and on relationships within schools. Working with other agencies is seen as important.

There appears to be an assumption that all behavioural problems are the result of social circumstances, personal trauma or unmet needs. The CSR agrees that these are important matters. However, they are often beyond the capacity of the school to resolve. Furthermore, there is much unacceptable behaviour that is the result of other factors; many of them trivial and of passing importance. Many stem simply from pupils being young and generally full of energy. The implication that bad behaviour on the part of pupils is the fault of the teacher or of some shortcoming in the organisation of the school is inaccurate and counter-productive in practice.

In the government papers there is an emphasis on the rights of pupils but little mention of responsibilities. Apart from its adverse effect of school discipline, this is hardly an appropriate way of developing ‘responsible citizens’. There is very little mention in either document of sanctions. This is fundamentally misguided. While some of the suggested approaches have much to commend them, there is a reluctance to face the question, what happens when they do not work. Schools need assistance in working out an effective graduated series of escalating sanctions. These can include short-term removal from the classroom, referral to senior staff and more serious sanctions such as suspension and exclusion. It must also be recognised that the law applies in schools. Assault, extortion and other serious offences are properly dealt with by the police rather than within school disciplinary systems. Unlike the recent official publications, the existing legislation is clear in relation to the use of sanctions.

It is important to understand the implications of the law. The Education (Scotland) Act 1980 states clearly that the obligation to ensure that a child receives a sound education rests, not on the Scottish Government or the local authority, but on the parents. Parents can meet their obligation by enrolling the child in a local authority school (or by using the independent sector or making some other suitable arrangement such as private tutoring). Using the local authority system imposes a requirement on the parents to ensure that their child accepts the authority of the school and complies with its rules. Parents who fail to ensure their child's regular attendance are guilty of an offence. That failure can be the consequence of exclusion because of a refusal to abide by the school's rules.

In other words, a kind of contract exists between the parent and the local authority. The parent can hand over the education of the child to the local authority. In return the parent must ensure that the child attends regularly and does not behave in such a way that he/she is unable to attend because of exclusion. If the actions of the child result in the parent being in breach of his/her obligations, the school can use sanctions. In extreme cases, matters can be dealt with by the courts.

All this has a very different feel from the recent national action plan and guidance which shy away from the notion of sanctions or even the idea that actions have consequences. The 1980 Act was written in a very different social context. Attitudes have become less punitive. Acceptance of authority and respect for institutions has declined. However, the notion of a contract between family and school remains valid.

There is a continuing need to ensure good order so that all pupils have the best chance of learning successfully.

1. Education is the subject of quite frequent legislation. It used to be the practice that, at intervals of 15-20 years or so, a new consolidated Act would be passed incorporating all new provisions into the basic legal framework, thus making it relatively easy for local authorities, headteachers, parents and other interested parties to know what the law was. The 1980 Act is the last of its kind. Forty-five years has passed with a multitude of new laws being passed in the meantime. As a result, it is now very difficult for a non-professional to be clear about education law. The Commission regards this as deeply regrettable and would hope that the Scottish Government will introduce a new consolidating Act during the next Parliament.

The Way Forward

The CSR believes that there is a need for national guidance which clearly asserts the right of every young person to an education which is not disrupted by others and recognises that dealing effectively and quickly with bad behaviour requires sanctions. While the rights of pupils who are keen to learn must be seen as a priority, disruptive pupils also have a right to education which must be respected. Indeed, failing to give such young people the means of earning a living and finding a place in society is potentially disastrous. Schools should be sympathetic to pupils who have problems and try to understand and address the causes of their difficulties. They should collaborate with other agencies in seeking solutions. However, the need to provide a positive learning environment for the majority is the main priority.

Current national guidance disempowers teachers. New guidance should make clear the importance of creating order in schools. It should emphasise the need for staff to develop a positive school ethos while recognising the necessity for sanctions to be employed when necessary. It should give examples of the lesser kinds of sanction that might be used while recognising that these will vary from school to school. It must also make clear the need for schools to be able to take actions necessary to protect the right to education of the majority of young people.

The guidance should make clear the obligation of parents to support schools in seeking to ensure acceptable behaviour by their children. The relationship should be a collaborative one. There would be merit in encouraging pilot projects with the intention of identifying and disseminating good practice in this essential facet of school life.

It is, therefore, essential that national guidance should recognise the need for schools to be able to withdraw the right to attend from pupils guilty of persistent or extreme behavioural problems. We think it useful to distinguish between 'suspension' for a short period and 'exclusion'; permanent withdrawal of the right to attend at least the specific school in question. (However, moving disruptive pupils from one school to another is not a substitute for addressing their difficulties or the problems they create for others.) Schools should not be made to feel that the use of exclusion is contrary to national policy and likely to incur official disapproval. This is not to argue that schools are invariably right. It is entirely appropriate that families should have the opportunity to appeal to a committee of the local authority and there are undoubtedly cases where that committee will be right to uphold the appeal.

Local authorities should be supportive of their schools but not in circumstances where a school has acted unjustly or disproportionately.

Guidelines should offer assistance in creating a positive ethos while recognising that schools differ in their approaches. The nature of communication among and between staff and pupils is of crucial importance. Courtesy and respect are essential. The role of the headteacher and leadership team is central; they establish the ethos within which the school functions. The staff look to them for guidance and help. Respect for their authority is of paramount importance.

It must be recognised that schools are essentially collective institutions. Other public services – for example health and criminal justice – deal with individuals relatively infrequently and in response to specific circumstances. Schools provide a service to young people in groups on a sustained basis over years. There is a limit to the extent to which schools can accommodate individual difference.

There is much good practice on which to build. Many schools sustain an excellent ethos, dealing with a wide range of problems sympathetically, effectively and in a manner which allows the essential business of learning to proceed in the classroom. This includes schools in the most challenging areas. It is important that schools have the opportunity to learn from each other. Building on experiential knowledge is essential.

School leaders must be helped to develop as full an understanding as possible of promoting a school ethos which is educationally purposeful and responsive to the needs of the individual. The CSR considers it unacceptable that such issues are largely ignored, both in initial teacher education and in leadership development programmes. There is insufficient exchange of opinion, experience and expertise among serving senior staff. Networks of senior staff offer an effective mechanism for this kind of activity.

Society has changed in ways which make the maintenance of an orderly learning ethos in schools more difficult. These changes were accelerated by Covid and little corrective action has been taken subsequently. Respect for authority has declined. In some ways this is positive. Constructive questioning can bring improvement. However, an unthinking sense of entitlement is another matter. Government – national and local – has a responsibility to give support and assistance. New guidance, firmly based on enabling schools to fulfil their essential function of advancing young people's learning, would be a first step.

Conclusions

1. There is a serious and growing behavioural problem in Scottish schools.
2. The poor behaviour of a minority adversely affects the education of all pupils.
3. Behavioural problems create stress for teachers, resulting in poor recruitment and retention.
4. Indiscipline has contributed to Scotland's decline in international comparisons of educational standards.

Recommendations

1. In determining their positions in relation to behaviour in schools, schools, local authorities and the Scottish Government should start from the standpoint that all young people have a right to an education that is not disrupted by the conduct of others.
2. The Scottish Government should issue new national guidance which:
 - Asserts the right of all young people to an education unimpeded by others;
 - Recognises the need for sanctions in maintaining a good learning environment in schools and lifts the pressure on headteachers not to use more serious sanctions such as suspension;
 - Gives advice on the use of sanctions including, in serious cases, suspension by the headteacher and exclusion (removal to another school by the local authority);
 - Emphasises the key role of senior management in schools;
 - Recognises the need for support from parents and promotes home/school partnerships.
3. Teachers and senior staff require improved initial training and CPD (including learning from each other) to help them create a positive ethos in class and throughout the school.

