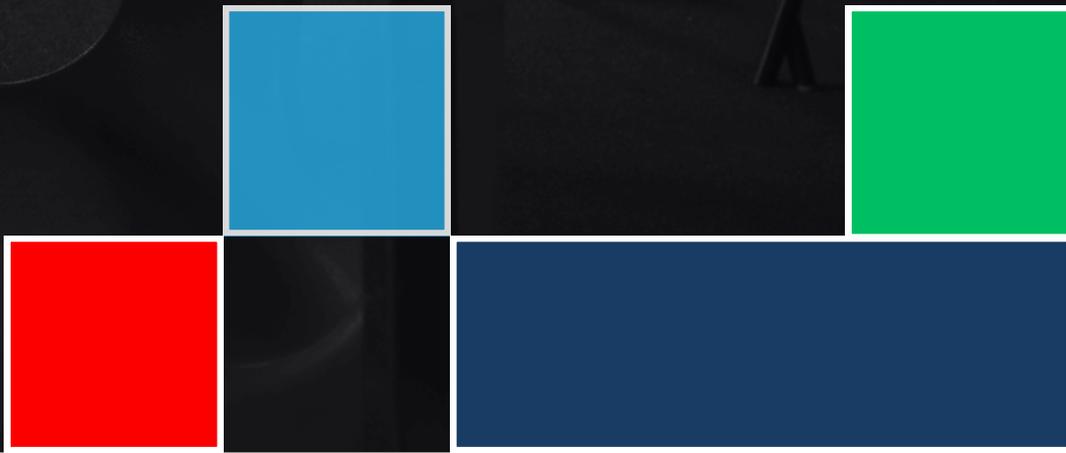


Commission on School Reform

EDUCATION
MANIFESTO
2026



Membership of the Commission on School Reform is as follows:

- **Keir Bloomer (Chair):** Education Consultant and former Director of Education
- **Councillor 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
- **Councillor 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.

The Commission on School Reform is the education arm of the independent think tank Enlighten. Enlighten is a non-partisan public policy institute which works to promote increased economic prosperity, more effective public services and expanded opportunities for all Scots. Enlighten is independent of political parties and any other organisations. It is funded by donations from private individuals, charitable trusts and corporate organisations. The Director and Research Director work closely with the Advisory Board, chaired by Lord McConnell, which meets regularly to review the research and policy programme.

Summary of Main Recommendations

CURRICULUM

The curriculum should be knowledge-based and reflect a scientific understanding of how people learn.

The knowledge and skills students are expected to learn should be much clearer. This will help teachers and lead to improved assessment and understanding of progress.

National guidance should be strategic, limited and clearly the responsibility of government. Education Scotland should be abolished. Details of the curriculum should be developed by specialist subject panels, staffed mainly by currently practising teachers.

ASSESSMENT

Objective assessment under examination conditions should remain the main component in assessment for qualifications from Qualifications Scotland (formerly SQA).

In the short-term, our recommendations for reducing the time spent on assessment and increasing time for learning should be taken forward.

PASTORAL CARE

The importance of pastoral care and its role in relation to ASN and behaviour should be recognised.

A major expert review of pastoral care and support for young people with additional support needs should be carried out early in the new parliament.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT NEEDS (ASN)

Greater emphasis should be given to developing practical advice for class teachers.

It should be recognised that the current arrangements are unsustainable and a commitment should be made to implementing the outcomes of the recommended review of pastoral care and ASN.

BEHAVIOUR

The CSR believes that there is a need for revised guidance which:

- asserts the right of every young person to an education which is not disrupted by others
- recognises that dealing effectively and quickly with poor behaviour requires sanctions
- makes clear the obligation of parents to support schools in seeking to ensure acceptable behaviour by their children.

EARLY YEARS

The focus now requires to be on improving the quality of provision.

Funding should be provided for innovative provision across health and learning for vulnerable children from birth until entry to primary school.

GOVERNANCE

School autonomy should be increased, particularly in relation to curriculum delivery, behaviour management, deployment of staff and use of resources.

Leadership development should be improved.

DATA

An improved data framework should be developed under the leadership of a new Office for Scottish Education Data.



Introduction

Since we last offered policy suggestions in advance of a Scottish election, concerns about education have intensified. The most recent PISA results strongly suggest that overall performance continues to decline compared with other participating countries. Any progress in closing the attainment gap has been slight and slow, despite the adoption of increasingly generous metrics. There has been a rapid increase in the number of pupils deemed to have additional needs and in the cost of making provision for them but parental dissatisfaction remains high. Pastoral care has been neglected and there is insufficient understanding of its contribution to catering for additional support needs. Public concern is increasingly evident in relation to pupil absence and behaviour. Parental support for education is in decline with increased toleration of absence and more challenges to school authority.

There is an evident need for a broader and more ambitious programme of reform than any currently envisaged. Young people deserve both a more effective approach to learning and better support for their all-round development.

Curriculum

Much of the criticism of Scottish education centres on its national curriculum, the Curriculum for Excellence which applies to pre-five, primary and the early years of secondary education. There is widespread agreement that the four objectives of education set out in the original 2004 document remain appropriate, albeit at a level of generality which does little to guide practice in schools. Criticism is mainly directed at the process of implementation which began in 2008.

There are two main concerns:

1. There is no adequate specification of curriculum content. The Experiences and Outcomes which seek to fulfil this purpose are vague and difficult for teachers to interpret and put into practice. As a result there is little consistency of approach from school to school. Secondary schools lack certainty about the prior educational experience of those coming from primary.
2. The place of knowledge in the curriculum has been devalued. Increasing research evidence about how learning takes place and the importance of knowledge and long-term memory has been neglected. A focus on ill-defined “twenty-first century skills”, now often described as “meta-skills”, has left pupils ill-equipped for further learning.

Although these are the most damaging aspects of the current curricular arrangements, they are by no means the only causes of concern. The following paragraphs look in more detail at the present situation in the primary and secondary sectors.

Primary school is where the basis of knowledge is first laid down. What matters is cultivating pupils’ enthusiasm by engaging them most importantly with essential basic skills, particularly in literacy and numeracy. Without the basics, nothing else is possible. Once pupils have grasped these fundamentals, they then have to be led through the main ideas of each subject in the curriculum - the excitement of science to understand the

natural world around them, being engrossed in good novels and poems, following the story-lines of history, seeing the fascinating diversity of societies across the world, enjoying a rich repertoire of music, art and dance. Grasping these fundamental aspects of the curriculum lays the groundwork for all future learning, including secondary school courses.

The absence of credible performance data – particularly since Scotland’s withdrawal from TIMSS and PIRLS – makes it impossible to judge the effectiveness of the primary curriculum. The Assessment of Curriculum for Excellence Levels (ACEL) exercise – although now in its tenth year – continues to be burdensome but says nothing useful about the standards being achieved because it is entirely based on teachers’ subjective judgment, unsupported by objective evidence. It cannot be used to measure progress or make comparisons. Some schools use standardised tests for these purposes but the practice is far from universal.

It is clear that many teachers struggle with the vagueness of the curriculum, particularly at a time when problems such as pupil absence and aggressive behaviour are becoming more widespread and the extent of other demands being placed on schools is increasing. Scottish pupils’ declining performance in PISA at age 15 suggests that basic knowledge and skills are receiving insufficient attention in some schools. Clearer guidance regarding phonics is required. There is concern about the handling of STEM subjects and the value of the modern languages initiative. Very importantly, the lack of content specificity in the Experiences and Outcomes makes appropriate assessment difficult and, indeed, undermines understanding of standards. They should be abandoned as quickly as possible.

The move from primary to secondary school remains difficult for too many pupils. Problems could be reduced if associated primary and secondary schools, within the context of a better-specified curriculum, agreed on what needs to be learned by the end of primary. Concerted action of this kind can also allow the sharing of ideas for teaching among these schools. It should also help to ensure that there isn’t unnecessary repetition of content at secondary school, a scenario that can easily arise if there is a lack of clarity among secondary teachers about what is being taught in primary schools. A greater degree of content specification at a national level is, therefore, essential to support curriculum collaboration between the primary and secondary sectors.

Little has been done to address the fragmentation of the early secondary experience. As in primary, there is a lack of proper specification of knowledge and skills in the curriculum in the early secondary years. Ill-considered national guidance has led to a narrowing of the curriculum at S4 in many schools. The transition from the phase of Broad General Education (S1-3/4) to the Senior Phase (S3/4-6) has not received sufficient thought. There is a widespread perception that many Qualifications Scotland certificate examinations are formulaic and unchallenging.

Teachers lack confidence in the national agencies which are supposed to support them. They consider that their expertise is insufficiently valued. This is illustrated most clearly in the mountains of jargon-ridden guidance issued by Education Scotland, which serves mainly to reveal the excessive influence of an unaccountable establishment in Scottish education (*see section on governance*).

If these problems are to be addressed, far-reaching change in the nature of curricular policy and the way in which it is developed will be required. In particular:

- Curriculum policy should be strategic and limited in extent. Government should be responsible for it to the Scottish Parliament without the shelter currently offered by a curriculum quango which has long since lost the confidence of the profession
- Education Scotland should be abolished. Any future curriculum organisation should be focused on providing teachers with practical advice and support of a kind that is valued. The role of teacher networks in promoting improvement should be recognised
- Schools should enjoy increased autonomy within clear national guidance to implement a knowledge-based curriculum. Broad strategy should remain a government concern. Increased diversity of practice should be seen as a means of promoting improvement
- Resources for developing practice and providing support should be progressively devolved to school level where it can be used to buy in expertise, support teacher and senior staff networks and enable professional development
- Existing guidance including the Experiences and Outcomes and the Building the Curriculum series should be withdrawn. Future curriculum specification should reflect an increased focus on specific knowledge and skills (as opposed to vague, ill-defined experiences and outcomes).
- The traditional breadth of the S4 curriculum should 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.

Curricular reform will require investment in professional development. However, it also requires reform of initial teacher education. Greater emphasis needs to be given to the importance of knowledge, an understanding of how people learn and of the underpinning neuroscience. Space can beneficially be created by reducing time spent on ideological issues.

We recognise that, since the last Scottish election, two important and positive decisions have been made:

1. Scotland is to rejoin TIMMS and PIRLS, two international surveys of attainment from which it had previously withdrawn. Although it will take time before this measure takes practical effect, useful comparative data will be available from the early 2030s onward.
2. An independent Inspectorate is to be re-established, ending the conflict of interest inherent in combining the curriculum development and inspection functions.

While re-establishing a genuinely independent Inspectorate would be a step forward, it will be important at the same time to withdraw the current edition of 'How good is our school?' which is badly out of date. It is, indeed, questionable whether the Inspectorate should have a template of assumptions about what constitutes a good school. Rather, inspectors' task is to evaluate what they see in schools without preconceptions.

On the other hand, we regret that legislation intended to strengthen the autonomy of schools did not proceed.

We have placed this section on the curriculum first amongst a wide range of proposals because the deterioration evident in the performance of Scottish school education over the first quarter of this century cannot be halted unless action is taken. However, we recognise that policy-making has been excessively concerned with issues of curriculum, assessment and certification and attach importance to the ways in which learners are supported as described in the section on pastoral care.

Further reading: [How a Knowledge-Based Curriculum Could Transform Scottish Education](#); [Broken Stem](#); [Scotland's Reading Crisis – Hiding in Plain Sight](#); [PISA 2022 – Declining Attainment & Growing Social Inequality](#); [Submission to 'School Inspections are Changing](#).

Assessment and Examinations

The operation of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (now Qualifications Scotland) was strongly criticised during the period of lockdown. Subsequently the Scottish Government has announced that it will be replaced by a new examinations agency, although it is not yet clear how this will differ from its predecessor. The opportunity must be taken to improve the quality of the assessment process and of the qualifications on offer. It should also be made clear that schools are entitled to secure examination and certification services from the supplier of their choice.

The Hayward Review recommended that the use of formal examinations should be largely replaced by the use of coursework. The Commission is pleased that this recommendation has been rejected. Although the use of a blend of different kinds of assessment has great merit, the objectivity of examinations and their freedom from plagiarism (including the use of AI) and outside help mean that they must continue to play a major part in national qualifications. This is fully compatible with the appropriate use of assessments of practical work in a range of subjects.

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 should involve a raising of the minimum age for leaving education or training to 18 and a closer alignment of the later stages of secondary schooling with tertiary education and the training system.

There is a need to improve collaboration between schools and colleges. Local authorities have a key role in this process. In some parts of the country, increased outreach from colleges will be essential. The introduction of Foundation Apprenticeships has been a success and they should be adopted more widely. This will have implications for the metrics often used to measure school performance.

The sixth year at school now offers a more coherent experience than in the past but, at a time of serious financial constraint, the co-existence of the sixth year and four-year degrees merits critical consideration.

At the same time as considering how to extend education and training to 18, it has to be recognised that a significant number of young people lose meaningful contact with the

system at a much earlier age. They come disproportionately from disadvantaged families. Some schools offer more flexible approaches, especially in S3 and S4. Often these initiatives involve collaboration with colleges or with third sector organisations. There is a need for systematic evaluation of these various approaches. The system can then benefit from successful approaches as well as from the experience the short-lived but highly-innovative Newlands Junior College.

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, improvements to be made in the shorter term. More time could be made available for learning by:

- Conducting all S4 assessments prior to the Easter holidays. The timetable should be as condensed as possible, ending on the last day of term. Changes to the exams themselves could facilitate a condensed timetable
- S4 pupils should commence Higher courses on their return to school after the Easter holidays. This will eliminate the protracted period of study leave and the consequent loss of momentum, and will add a minimum of eight weeks teaching time to the Higher course. There would still be time for the usual summer term activities at the end of June
- Marking of S4 papers should be conducted in April and early May
- S5/6 assessments should be timetabled to end one week before the end of the summer term, to allow for any celebratory activity. The timetable should be as condensed as possible
- Assuming a maximum of 5 weeks for the S5/6 exam timetable, this would add at least 4 weeks to teaching time at the beginning of the summer term. The net result would be the equivalent of a full extra term for Higher, where the real deficit lies, consisting of eight weeks in S4 plus four weeks in S5. This would also result in an extra four weeks for Advanced Higher
- Marking of S5/6 exams should be accomplished in the shorter time frame since S4 marking will already have been completed.

Improving the quality of assessments and qualifications is a longer-term task. However, an early start could be made by making a commitment that all assessments should reflect the following principles of fairness, reliability and validity.

Improving the quality of assessments and qualifications is a long-term task. However, an early start could be made by making a commitment that the full curriculum should be assessed in a non-predictable format, with increased emphasis on the retention of knowledge, appropriate high levels of challenge and the capacity to think quickly.

More time could be made available for learning by adjusting and accelerating existing Qualifications Scotland exam timetables. Due attention should be paid to the overall assessment load in terms of time for teaching and teacher workload.

Further Reading: [Smarter Thinking: Assessment in the Senior Phase](#); [CSR Challenge Paper – Assessment & Qualification in Scotland's Schools](#)

Pastoral Care

Since the Second World War, a plethora of reports reviewing primary and secondary school education, of which CfE is merely one and the Hayward and Muir reports are but the latest, have led to major changes in schools. However, only one was focused on the pastoral role of schools – the National Review of Guidance (2004), which was immediately ignored as Curriculum for Excellence was rolled out. In the history of change in Scottish education, opportunities for a thorough examination and evaluation of the pastoral role of schools have been repeatedly missed in favour of a focus on the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and qualifications. This remains true, even after a pandemic in which concerns about wellbeing were otherwise to the fore.

In effect, despite all the pressures on schools to take an active interest in pupil well-being, tackling child poverty and a host of other social issues, policy-making continues to view schools as being exclusively concerned with learning and teaching, attainment, qualifications and the curriculum. In the annual school census it is (and always has been) impossible to find anything about the pastoral role of schools. This crucial national data set continues to treat schools as if they were organisations exclusively concerned with the curriculum - in the case of secondaries, the subject curriculum - and assessment.

Staff in schools and parents know better. What has become increasingly obvious since the pandemic - though it had been hidden in plain sight for decades before that - is that a huge and increasing proportion of time, energy, expertise and resource in schools is spent on pastoral issues, such as attendance, behaviour and additional support needs. In fact, in many (perhaps most) schools these three areas dominate the daily life of the senior leadership and pastoral teams and have a significant impact on the work of class teachers. Schools rely on their pastoral care staff to play a major role in catering for pupils with additional support needs.

The key post-pandemic pressure on Scottish schools is their dramatically expanding pastoral role. Schools are now faced with the increased demands being made by deteriorating pupil attendance and by a range of new challenging behaviours exacerbated by social media and mobile phone use. Moreover, since the turn of the century schools have had to meet the challenges of the “presumption of mainstreaming”, i.e. the placing of increasing numbers of pupils with additional support needs in primary and secondary schools without any significant increase in their resources (see below). Schools continue to cope with the traditional and ubiquitous problems associated with child poverty. Currently, relative child poverty in Scotland sits at 24%. Moreover, an ever-increasing proportion of their intake (nationally now 40% of Scotland’s school population) is legally entitled to “additional” support. That support in many, perhaps most, cases is of a pastoral rather than a curricular nature.

These burdens fall largely, if not exclusively, on schools’ pupil support staff and senior leadership teams. In primary schools, where there is no pastoral care structure, the challenges facing headteachers and senior staff are particularly intense. It is little wonder that it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit primary HTs in some local authorities. And yet nationally, even after a pandemic which saw schools’ pastoral capacity stretched to its limits, we continue to give exclusive priority to curriculum, qualifications and assessment, as the two most recent national reports, Muir (2022) and Hayward (2023) – neither of which so much as mentions pastoral care in schools - amply demonstrate.

The prevailing professional culture in which Scottish teachers have been immersed, before but especially since CfE, continues to value curricular expertise much more highly than pastoral expertise and the system continues to direct energy and resources to focus almost exclusively on the curriculum, assessment, certification and national qualifications. In the primary school there is no organised system of pastoral care and responsibility falls entirely on class teachers and senior management.

Especially in the current climate, the pastoral capacity of Scotland's schools should be seen as a key enabler of curricular and pedagogical progress for all children and not solely as a support system for increasing numbers of young people in need of additional support for a widening range of reasons that include attendance and behaviour. Nevertheless, it must be recognised that pastoral care plays a crucial role in catering for additional needs. Indeed, it would be perfectly appropriate to see provision for such needs as an intrinsic part of pastoral care. It is only the number and complexity of the issues relating to ASN which has caused us to devote to it a separate section in this manifesto.

Defining the role of pastoral support, determining appropriate structures and providing necessary resources are complex tasks. There are some steps that could be taken in the short term. A local authority or even an individual secondary school could take initial steps to strengthen pastoral care provision. We would recommend that this is done.

However, the number and complexity of the issues involved are such that more fundamental change is required. A comprehensive expert review of the Guidance/Pupil Support structures in Scotland's secondary schools, including consideration of the position in primary schools where there is currently no pupil support structure, is urgently needed. The scope of this review should include the nature of future provision for additional support needs in recognition of the fact that it is through pastoral care that most additional needs are best addressed.

Further Reading: [CSR Challenge Paper – Additional Support Needs](#)



Additional Support Needs

There are few subjects in education as contentious as additional support needs. This is true of Scotland but also of numerous other jurisdictions.

The origins of the present system can be traced back to the Warnock Report published in 1978, when it was anticipated that a very small proportion of learners might need dedicated additional support. The current arrangements are signally failing to cope with very different circumstances in which over 40% of school pupils are deemed to have additional needs.



In practice, teachers cannot give meaningful individually tailored help to nearly half of all young people. They serve only to raise expectations that cannot be met. Parents are led to believe not only that their children will receive additional attention but that the effect will be a worthwhile improvement in their attainments. As a result, many families experience extreme frustration either because they cannot access help that they believe is needed or because that help proves ineffective.

There is a 'presumption of mainstreaming' which means that provision for a wide range of special needs is often made in mainstream primary and secondary. As a result, the number and capacity of special schools has been significantly reduced. In some areas, the 'presumption' means that councils are reluctant to place pupils in special schools and families can access such provision only after an unsuccessful placement in mainstream. In primary and secondary schools, support is often provided by classroom or pupil support assistants who may lack appropriate qualifications or access to any kind of professional development. Teachers lack concrete advice on practicable strategies which will improve outcomes for pupils. Schools struggle to cope with the demands being placed on them. Attendance at a mainstream school does not always result in full inclusion in the life of that school. There has been no evaluation of the effects of the presumption of mainstreaming.

Furthermore, it is practically certain that the percentage of children identified as having additional needs will continue to rise. On the other hand, it is far from clear what proportion of the increase can be attributed to improved diagnosis or parental pressure and what proportion to an increase in the incidence of particular problems.

The financial implications of the current trend are immense. Both the national and individual council education budgets are under great pressure and increase only very slowly. It seems unlikely that this situation will change as a result of the recent spending review. By contrast, the cost of meeting additional needs is spiralling and, unless effective action is taken, will continue to do so. The consequence is that resources available to provide for the education of learners without ASN are being squeezed.

Nobody is content with the present arrangements. Current trends will only cause further deterioration. This is an issue which cannot be ignored. At the same time it is immensely contentious, making it understandable that political parties are reluctant to pursue it.

The Commission is convinced that current arrangements are unsustainable. However, the issues are so complex that it hesitates to suggest solutions. In this case, the best approach is to establish an independent expert committee (similar to Warnock) to examine the issues, listen to the views of all concerned and make recommendations (including for future legislation). The matter is urgent but it would be unrealistic to give the committee less than two years to do its work.

Further Reading: [CSR Challenge Paper – Additional Support Needs](#)

Behaviour and Attendance

All young people have a right to education. This must not be compromised by the behaviour of others. However, behavioural problems regularly disrupt classes and prevent the well-behaved majority from learning in peace. There has also been a growth in violence in schools.

The 2023 report of the Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research indicates that 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. The SSTA union claims that 92% of all lessons are interrupted by mobile phones.

The Scottish Government has responded to concerns expressed by teachers, parents and the public at large by issuing new guidance. Its emphasis is on addressing the causes of poor behaviour and on relationships within schools. There is very little mention of sanctions. 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? The Commission believes that schools need assistance in working out an effective graduated series of escalating sanctions and deserve support from local authorities and the government. They must be able to withdraw the right to attend from pupils guilty of persistent or extreme behavioural problems.

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.

The CSR believes that there is a need for revised guidance which:

- asserts the right of every young person to an education which is not disrupted by others
- recognises that dealing effectively and quickly with poor behaviour requires sanctions
- makes clear the obligation of parents to support schools in seeking to ensure acceptable behaviour by their children.

Attendance at school matters. School education is compulsory because it offers the best start in life for young people. Frequent absence damages the learning of the individual and disrupts the work of the class.

It is, therefore, very concerning that in session 2022/23, nearly a third of Scottish pupils (32%) attended for less than 90% of the time. In other words, they missed at least one day every fortnight; a level of absence certain to have a serious adverse effect on learning.

12% of pupils had an attendance of 80% or less. Such levels of absence are almost invariably damaging to the learning of the young people involved.

The Commission believes that the Scottish Government should conduct an investigation into the extent of absenteeism and its causes. It would be useful to know whether it is linked to factors such as socio-economic deprivation, neurodiversity, sex and ethnicity. At the same time, it should support pilot projects in individual schools and local authorities aimed at securing improved support from parents and higher levels of attendance.

Further reading: [Behaviour in Schools](#); [Absent Minds: Attendance & Absence in Scotland's Schools](#); [Diary of an Anonymous Secondary Teacher](#); [The Positive Impact of Becoming a Mobile-Free School](#)

Early Years

The expansion of early-years provision has been a success story of recent years. The emphasis has been on creating additional places and meeting family needs but now needs to shift to ensuring the most effective developmental experience for children. 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 ensure that the most vulnerable children receive an appropriate service as soon as possible. This will require better data. The Millennium Cohort study showed Scottish pre-school children performing well compared to the rest of the UK but it is not possible to assess the respective contributions of parents and early-years services. The shortage of good quality data on Scottish education means that there is no up-to-date evidence on the effectiveness of pre-school education.

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. This will have significant resource implications.

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. These services should progress from a focus on health in the early stages to a later focus on learning. They should involve parents closely and help them in parenting their children.

The Health Visitor service plays an important role in promoting all-round child development. This includes the identification of difficulties and can lead to early and effective intervention. We believe the service could usefully be extended beyond the age of 4/5, thus enhancing child emotional wellbeing and safeguarding. This would be particularly effective if combined with improvements in pastoral care in line with our recommendations.

Further reading: [Early Intervention & Pastoral Care Key to Addressing Adverse Childhood Experiences](#)

Governance and Culture



Successive governments have sought to exercise control over the education service at a level of operational detail which is inappropriate. This has not been to the same extent a feature of other major public services. As ministers generally lack the necessary detailed level of knowledge, this has often led to an undue importance being attached to inputs rather than outcomes for learners. Promises are often made to increase funding or teacher numbers when the focus should be on making changes that will lead to improved learning.

Scotland has the best-funded school system in the UK but this is not reflected in the results achieved. Furthermore, increased power has been handed to unelected and unaccountable interest groups which now exercise excessive and frequently ill-directed influence in the system.

A particularly regrettable example of the abuse of power in the system has been a tendency to describe headteachers and senior school staff as council officers whose freedom to offer views on education is very restricted. Important insights, of the kind that clinicians are able to contribute to discussions on the NHS, are thus lost. A much preferable approach would be to treat all teachers in a similar way to academics in universities. In terms of the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act 2016, academics are entitled inter alia to hold and express opinions and present controversial or unpopular points of view. Scotland needs teachers and educational leaders with courage and the capacity for independent thought.

Since devolution, control of education has become over-centralised. Despite the extensive role for local authorities set out in legislation, they have in practice been largely relegated to the function of implementing government decisions. This appropriation of power by Scottish Ministers and the Scottish Parliament is a feature of most all aspects of public services. There is a clear need to revive governance at more local levels, a major issue which lies beyond the scope of this paper. Until action is taken on this broader issue, the role of local government in education should be reasserted.

The issuing of large quantities of guidance – much of it unsupported by good evidence - by central government bodies has disempowered classroom professionals and created an unhealthy culture of compliance. Teacher creativity has been inhibited. It has also made the system more uniform, lacking diversity and unable to learn either from its own largely similar experience or the experience of others.

Processes of change are ineffective, relying on the mistaken belief that government announcement will automatically result in action in line with government intention. Programmes of reform unfailingly deliver less than was promised, although at a high cost in teacher workload.

The culture of the system exacerbates problems of teacher recruitment and retention, although other issues such as socio-economic circumstances and pupil misconduct are also involved. Planning and setting targets for entry to initial teacher education are unsatisfactory and need to be reformed. The rigidity of the distinction between primary and secondary training and deployment does not serve the system well. Other GTC regulations should receive critical scrutiny.

No government will succeed in making the improvements to governance that are necessary unless it is prepared to challenge the way in which the system is run. This will require action at four levels. (a) Nationally, it is necessary to reduce substantially the influence of quangos and vested interest groups. (b) Effective governance is required at a sub-national level. At present local authorities lack the freedom of action to fulfil this role. (c) The influence of parents within the system needs to be increased, possibly at cluster rather than individual school level. (d) Schools require to be empowered both by delegating increased powers to senior staff and by respecting the professional autonomy of teachers.

It may be that reform of educational governance at sub-national level is best undertaken in conjunction with reform in relation to other public services. It is now almost 30 years since the last unsatisfactory reorganisation of local authorities was undertaken.

In the intervening period, devolution took place and the Scottish Parliament was established. Pending consideration of such far-reaching change, there is a good case for improving governance at the level of the school.

The current system of Parent Councils denies parents appropriate influence. They should be replaced by empowered boards which would have a significant role in holding school leadership to account and would be able to represent the school's interests to local and national government. Membership should include parents, staff and pupils; local councillors; community and business interests.

We suggest that the following measures are necessary to ensure that education is effectively governed and managed:

- Schools and Head Teachers should enjoy greatly increased autonomy, particularly in relation to decisions affecting the use of resources and the curriculum implementation. This autonomy should be enshrined in legislation, including a requirement that more powerful governance boards be established for every school or school cluster
- Greater emphasis should be placed on updating leadership development for senior school staff to take account of the reforms to governance. This will require that leadership programmes emphasise independent thinking
- Initial teacher education and continuing professional development should focus on professional responsibilities including professional challenge, understanding the learning process and raising standards
- Increased government support, including financial support, for innovation at school level
- A review of school-level governance in order to strengthen the parent voice and facilitate the strengthening of links between schools and their communities.

Further Reading: [Fit for Purpose – School Governance for the 21st Century](#); [The English Education Revolution](#)

Data

Our school system has no coherent way of tracking children's learning, no data to investigate the effectiveness of different teaching strategies, no evidence on the relationship between children's progress and social circumstances, no information on the curriculum offered in secondary schools and no way of evaluating policy. In the absence of good data, the system lacks the means of driving improvement. Moreover, data is an essential feature of sound accountability and, therefore, necessary in a system of greater school autonomy such as we propose.

Our detailed proposals for improved data can be found [here](#). Of particular importance are:

- A regular longitudinal survey following pupils through P1, P4, P7, S3 and after leaving school to gather evidence of progress. At present there is no data set that can allow the progress of pupils to be measured, or to be seen, in the context of school practices, the changing curriculum or their own social circumstances. Unlike all Scottish government data, this would include independent schools, following the practice of the international surveys (PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS)
- Annual tracking data using the existing Scottish National Standardised Assessments and Qualifications Scotland assessments, which are currently held separately and unaligned
- An independent Office for Scottish Education Data to oversee the new structure, accountable to Parliament, not Government.

Further reading: [Why Education Data Matters](#); [Misleading Educational Statistics](#)



Conclusion

In recent years the Commission has laid great emphasis on the need to improve educational standards in Scotland by reforming the curriculum and teaching practices in ways which reflect the central importance of knowledge and the place of long-term memory in learning. Given the continuing decline of Scottish performance in international studies and in the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy prior to its abolition, this is both urgent and appropriate. It is worth noting that the evidence from both international and Scottish surveys suggests that the process of decline began before the end of the last century or the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence.

Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that the function of schools is wide-ranging and that other aspects of their role also require action. Reviewing the pastoral capacity across both primary and secondary sectors would lead to a more child-focused service, better able to address a wide range of issues such as absence, pupil behaviour and providing for additional needs.

In 2004, the then Scottish executive published Curriculum for Excellence, a short document which was, in effect, a mission statement setting out the purposes of education and sets of values and curriculum principles. We have been repeatedly critical of the programme of educational change bearing the same name which followed after 2008. However, we agree that schools, as well as developing learners, should help young people to become adults capable of contributing to society, concerned about its future and comfortable in their own skins.

Young people need to have opportunities to develop skills of leadership and resilience and to gain experience of taking responsibility for themselves and others. Some schools give this appropriate priority – but not all. The Scottish Parliament has recently discussed the value of outdoor education. This is very welcome. Adolescence is often a period of turbulence but it is also a time when young people see their horizons develop, experience a need for adventure and outlets for their energy and may need support in finding themselves.

Over recent decades there has been a huge expansion in tertiary education and more recently in second degrees and other post-graduate qualifications. Does a process which is extending dependency for very large numbers of young people into their twenties largely on the basis of academic study offer the best induction of young people into adulthood? This is a very large topic which deserves more attention than it has hitherto received.

Technology will continue to change the nature of work and the demands on the education service. AI is already having an impact on learning. As the school-age population shrinks, the need for lifelong access to learning will increase. It seems both certain and necessary that schooling will constitute a smaller part of total educational expenditure and of a person's lifelong experience of learning.

In short, education will change in ways which cannot be foreseen but will call for bold thinking and well-evidenced consideration as much by educators and stakeholders as by government. However, government needs to establish a culture and structures which make this possible.

After more than a quarter-century of devolution, it is surely undeniable that our schools system should be in better fettle than it is. Too many children have passed through without the support and direction that might have significantly enhanced their life chances and their opportunity for social mobility. Over the same period, as the Scottish education establishment has indulged its whims, other countries have reformed education in ways that have transformed lives, particularly for those from less-privileged backgrounds. We submit that the proposals contained in this manifesto would begin a process of transformative change in Scotland.

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