

## ***Education reform and Educational Attainment:***

*political priorities and a fast changing landscape*

### **The National Third Sector GIRFEC Project**

*This paper is designed to inform third sector organisations about recent and proposed changes to education policy and delivery in Scotland. It focuses mainly on educational attainment in the context of wider reforms of education governance and highlights some of the emerging issues in light of these changes. It also considers some of the challenges and opportunities for third sector organisations.*

#### **Introduction**

Education and reform of the education system is a priority for the Scottish Government. In her first speech to parliament following the 2016 Scottish parliament election the First Minister said that closing the educational attainment gap would be the Scottish Government's "defining mission"<sup>1</sup>. It is not hard to understand why the First Minister has put this issue at the top of the Government's priorities. A range of studies show that there is a strong link between deprivation and performance in literacy and numeracy with attainment levels steadily increasing as deprivation decreases.<sup>2</sup> The Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is based on a 'whole child' approach based on the three pillars of literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing.

This issues paper considers the policy and funding response to closing the gap in attainment including the wider changes to the education system proposed by the Scottish Government. It also outlines some of the concerns that have been expressed about the changes and some of the challenges and opportunities for third sector organisations.

#### **Education as a priority – policy and legislative background**

Policy and legislation in relation to education has moved quickly over the past year as it has been made more of a political priority. The changes to education are set out in the [National Improvement Framework and the Improvement Plan for Scottish Education](#). The Framework has four strategic priorities (1) improvement in attainment, particularly in literacy and numeracy (2) closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people (3) improvement in children and young people's health and wellbeing and (4) improvement in employability skills and sustained, positive school leaver destinations for all young people.

The legislative underpinning for these strategic priorities is the Education (Scotland) Act 2016.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10450&i=96268>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education/leavedestla/follleavedestat/attainmentandleavers1415>

The Act requires local authorities and Scottish Ministers to have regard to the need to reduce inequalities of educational outcome that are created by socio-economic disadvantage, and to report on the action they have taken to address this. This includes creating new reporting requirements on education improvement linked to the National Improvement Framework.

### [Delivering Excellence and Equity in Scottish Education](#)

To drive forward the reforms, the Scottish Government published a delivery plan - [Delivering Excellence and Equity in Scottish Education](#) - in June 2016. The plan sets out a range of policies on schools including:

- The implementation of the National Improvement Framework, which includes provision for standardised assessments.
- The establishment of the Scottish Attainment Challenge fund of £750m over five years (and the addition of the Pupil Equity Fund in February 2017)
- Simplification of Curriculum for Excellence documentation
- Review of school governance and of parental involvement
- Extension of early learning and childcare as set out in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and the subsequent [action plan](#)

All of these policy initiatives will have major implications for the way that education is delivered in Scotland and for the way in which third sector organisations work with schools and local authorities. This paper will focus primarily on attainment and the proposals for the reform of education governance.

### [Educational Attainment](#)

The two main approaches to closing the attainment gap centre on the measurement of attainment and the provision of funding to schools.

In a [letter to the Scottish Parliament's Education Committee](#) in September 2016 the Deputy First Minister and Education Secretary John Swinney said that that the Scottish Government has a long term ambition that *"there should be no pattern of lower attainment at any stage between children and young people from more and less deprived backgrounds and that should be the case however, wherever and whenever that is measured"*.

Measurement of the attainment gap is a key issue and is closely linked with the proposals to introduce standardised assessments. From August 2017, new national standardised assessments are being introduced as part of the National Improvement Framework, to help teachers judge how well children are doing and to plan next steps in their learning.

Every child in P1, P4, P7 and S3 will undertake national standardised assessments covering aspects of reading, writing and numeracy over the course of the school year. Whilst this approach centres on numeracy and literacy there are as yet no proposals for measuring progress in relation to the health and wellbeing 'pillar' of the CfE. There are however areas of good practice in relation to this type of measurement such as the Dartington surveys and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

Nevertheless the Scottish Government's International Council of Education Advisers (ICEA) expressed concern that *"there was a risk that education policy was moving away from the 'whole child' approach of CfE towards a more specific, measurable approach as required by the National Improvement Framework"*<sup>3</sup>.

## **Funding**

There are two main funding streams to support schools in closing what the Scottish Government are now calling the 'poverty related attainment gap'.

1. **The Attainment Fund:** this is a commitment to invest £750 million over the lifetime of this parliament (until 2021). The initial focus was on seven 'Challenge Authorities' and a schools programme of primary schools with particularly high levels of deprivation. In June 2016, the programme was extended to include secondary schools, and the number of Challenge Authorities was increased from seven to nine. The current 'Challenge Authorities' are: Glasgow, Dundee, Inverclyde, West Dunbartonshire, North Ayrshire, Clackmannanshire, North Lanarkshire, East Ayrshire and Renfrewshire<sup>4</sup>.
2. **Pupil Equity Fund (PEF):** In February 2017 the Deputy First Minister announced an additional £120 million would be allocated to tackling the attainment in gap in 2017/18. The money has been made available directly to schools on the basis of free school meal entitlement (FME) of pupils in primary schools from P1 to P7 and from S1 to S3 in secondary schools. The funding is allocated on the basis of £1200 per FME pupil and ranges from £6000 for some primary schools to £354,000 for a secondary school in an area of high deprivation. School allocations can be viewed [here](#).

The focus on closing the attainment gap has been welcomed across the political spectrum as has the additional funding. There has however been criticism from local authorities on distributing money through the PEF directly to schools and bypassing what they view as the democratic process and councillors who are accountable to local people for spending decisions. [National operational guidance](#) has been produced by the Scottish Government and a number of local authorities have produced their own guidance for headteachers. Again there are many examples of good practice in local areas and examples of where third sector organisations are working alongside staff in nurseries and schools.

## **Educational Governance**

The distribution of funding directly to schools through the Pupil Equity Fund would seem to be a precursor to more comprehensive change in education governance. The Scottish Government consulted widely on changing the governance of education. In June 2017 they outlined their next steps in reforming education in [Education Governance: Next Steps—Empowering Our Teachers, Parents and Communities to Deliver Excellence and Equity for Our Children](#) within which there are a number of changes designed to *"give more power and resources direct to schools, to put teachers, parents and communities in the driving seat of school improvement"* (Deputy First Minister in statement to Scottish Parliament 15 June).

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0052/00522962.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/Schools/Raisingeducationalattainment>

Central to the changes will be a statutory headteachers' charter with the intention being that headteachers will, amongst a range of responsibilities:

- be leaders of learning in their schools, responsible for raising attainment and closing the attainment gap
- be free to select and manage teachers and staff in their school
- determine their own school management and staffing structure
- decide on curriculum content
- directly control a significantly increased proportion of school funding

A second change is the intention to improve the involvement of parents and communities in schools by enhancing parent councils and strengthening legislation on parental involvement as well as strengthening pupil participation. Every school will also have access to a home-to-school link worker.

To support these changes it is proposed that there will be enhanced professional development opportunities for teachers with strengthened support provided at regional level. This will be done through regional improvement collaboratives which will be established to pool and strengthen resources to support learning and teaching in Scotland's schools. They will be led by a regional director who will report to the Chief Inspector of Education. The intention is that collaboratives will provide educational improvement support through dedicated teams of professionals and will draw on Education Scotland staff, local authority staff and others.

The ICEA have recommended that the Scottish Government consider creating federations of schools on a "simple collaborative basis or on a more formal standing with shared headteachers or Chief Executives leading across a number of schools". They suggest that such regionalisation/collaboration could be incentivised by making it one of the required criteria for any financial programme for example in any future iterations of the pupil equity fund. The ICEA also advise against becoming too focussed on changing the structure of the education system when, arguably, the more important aspects are the culture and capacity within the system.

### ***Challenges and opportunities for the third sector***

Many third sector organisations currently work in partnership with schools and local authorities to deliver services to pupils and parents as well as supporting the work of school staff. A great deal of this work is negotiated through the local authority either as standalone work or as part of a package of support services to children, young people and families in an area.

The provision of funding directly to schools poses challenges for third sector organisations who rather than negotiating with a local authority to provide services now need to negotiate at school level which has the potential to be much more resource intensive and require them to build new contacts, relationships and networks. This is a situation which may well benefit those organisations that have the resources to actively market their services to a wide ranging and geographically spread audience and deliver interventions at scale.

On the other hand many smaller organisations that are embedded in local communities may see funding being devolved to school level as a way of enabling their enhanced participation in their local learning communities given there are often many barriers to their involvement in large pieces

of commissioned work. This may offer an opportunity to bring local knowledge and use local contacts to provide services to children, young people and schools.

It is unclear how regionalisation or increased collaboration between either school clusters or local authorities to provide education will impact on the third sector. It may be that third sector organisations will have to work more collaboratively themselves to provide services to education on a larger scale and to avoid the risk of smaller organisations being squeezed out.

There are also implications for Children's Services Planning (and the third sector's role in this ) if significant decisions on children's services in and related to education are being taken either at school level – and the danger of losing a strategic overview – or at a regional level where the identification of local needs could be diluted.

### Conclusion

It is clear that the Scottish Government believe that significant change is required in Scotland's education system if they are to deliver on their stated aim of closing the gap in educational attainment. Proposals to carry out standardised assessments at particular key stages are perhaps understandable given the need to evidence progress on closing the gap. At the same time this will only measure progress in literacy and numeracy with the ICEA warning that such an approach risks losing the whole child approach. This also has implications for the GIRFEC approach to children and young people's wellbeing which takes a holistic view of needs. Concerns have also been expressed that there are dangers of 'teaching to the test' which can be detrimental to those already behind particularly those who have experienced disadvantage needing more play based, nurturing approaches to enable them to fully participate in learning.

The approach to attainment must be seen in the context of wider reforms and particularly those that propose changes in governance. It is unclear how devolving more decision making and budgets to school level will impact on third sector relationships with education, on the important support that these organisations give to schools and the on the established partnerships developed over many years. It is clear that some form of regionalisation/collaboration between schools and/or local authorities will be required by Government. Again it is unclear what impact this will have on local relationships and planning processes.

Third sector organisations need to be aware of, and to engage with, these changes to make sure they can continue to work in partnership to support children and young people. At the same time organisations need to take advantage of the opportunities to work collaboratively as a sector through engagement with local Third Sector Forums. Such an approach could significantly strengthen the sharing of knowledge and resources in a way which maximises the positive impact for children, young people and families.

## Website Links

- National Improvement Framework and the Improvement Plan for Scottish Education:  
<http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/12/8072/downloads>
- Delivering Excellence and Equity in Scottish Education:  
<http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/06/3853>
- Action Plan: <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2017/03/8937>
- Mr Swinney's letter to the Scottish Parliament's Education Committee:  
[http://www.parliament.scot/S5\\_Education/General%20Documents/20160901CabSec\\_Attainment\\_Gap\\_Measurement.pdf](http://www.parliament.scot/S5_Education/General%20Documents/20160901CabSec_Attainment_Gap_Measurement.pdf)
- PEF, School Allocations:  
<http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/Schools/Raisingeducationalattainment/pupilequityfund/Schoolallocations>
- National Operational Guidance:  
<http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/Schools/Raisingeducationalattainment/pupilequityfund/guidance>
- Education Governance: Next Steps—Empowering Our Teachers, Parents and Communities to Deliver Excellence and Equity for Our Children:  
<http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2017/06/2941>