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Excellence and equity in Scottish education - from the early years into adulthood

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Deputy First Minister John Swinney

Queen Margaret University, 23 March 2017

It is a great pleasure to be here this morning at the Queen Margaret University campus. The campus here is a truly open one, welcoming students from all over the world as well as the wider Scottish community. It is the second University in Scotland to host the Children’s University, raising the aspirations and broadening the learning horizons of 7-14 year old school children across the east of Scotland. It is a transformational initiative that the Scottish Government is pleased to support.

I was appointed as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills 10 months ago and since then have been engaging closely with all aspects of our education system. When the First Minister asked me to assume this role, I recognised it would be challenging but I also recognised it is the greatest privilege to have the opportunity to shape the future of Scottish education. The First Minister conveyed a clear message by asking me to take on this post; by appointing her Deputy First Minister as Education Secretary, she signalled the significance she attached to strengthen Scottish education.

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I want to take this opportunity to reflect on some of the impressions I have gained from Scottish education and to explain the shape of the direction I intend to take in the period that lies ahead.

Since my appointment, I have been very clear about my purpose in this role. I see it:

- To ensure that every child has an equal chance to fulfil his or her potential,
- To deliver the best possible outcomes for all of our children, and
- To use every moment in this term of Parliament to interrupt the cycle of deprivation and poverty which attacks the life chances of far too many children and young people in Scotland.

Put simply, my job is to deliver the brightest future for Scotland's youngest generation.

In taking that task on, I inevitably reflect on my own experience. I went to Forrester High School in Edinburgh - a school packed with teachers of quality and of inspiration. It gave me strong educational foundations and is a time I look back on with great fondness.

One reflection, however, has never left me.

When I started 1st year, it was in a year group of 120 pupils. By the time I reached 6th year, there were just 8 of us left.

Many of my contemporaries had left school to go on to pretty poor destinations. They were young people who had not fulfilled their potential.

For too many of my classmates, poverty and inequality determined their future. And, two generations later, poverty and inequality continue to hit the life chances of too many of our young people today.

There can never be a time when we are not striving to do much better for our young people.

Education is by far the most effective means we have to improve their life chances.

I am determined to seize the opportunity the First Minister has given me, to use it to transform lives for the better and, in doing so, transform the future of our country.

That is my agenda for Scottish education.

The question, of course, is how to we achieve this aim?

Since my appointment as Education Secretary, one thing is abundantly clear to me: there is no shortage of opinions on what I should do.

We have a vibrant, healthy contest of ideas about policy and performance. That is as it should be.

But sadly some of the contributions to that debate create an impression of Scottish education that is simply false. A wholly unrepresentative picture is sometimes given of our schools, colleges and universities.

It serves neither the country nor our children and young people for that impression to go unchallenged and I challenge it at every opportunity. But nor does it serve anyone for the challenges we do genuinely face to go unacknowledged and unaddressed.

In assessing what is fair, constructive criticism and what is simply political rhetoric, there is only one yardstick: the data.

Let's start with the positives:

- We now have more young people achieving excellent exam results: the number of Advanced Higher passes last year reached an all-time high while the number of Highers passes surpassed 150,000 for only the second time.
- Four out of ten students from Scotland's 20% most deprived areas left school in 2014-15 with at least one higher or equivalent – double the rate in 2007.
- We have more school leavers going on to positive destinations - a record 93.3% went on to positive destinations in 2015-16, up from 87% in 2007.
- Over 90% of full-time and over 93% of part-time college students are satisfied with their overall college experience.
- We have a record University entry rate of 10.9% for 18 year olds from the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland, a 3.7 percentage point increase since 2006; and
- In 2014-15 - 91% of graduates from Scottish HEIs went into either employment, further study or a combination of the two.

That is what some of the data tells us.

It shows that those people who seek to run down Scottish education, are choosing to ignore the objective reality of our system in pursuit of an ideological aim or to inflict political damage on the Government for other purposes.

But it is not the only thing the data tells us.

While we must promote the positives, if we are to close the attainment gap and raise the bar for all, we must also acknowledge and address the challenges.

Our PISA scores – the OECD's international measure of school education performance – have fallen. And they reflect the same finding as our own figures on literacy and numeracy from the SSLN.

Based on the data we have gathered on Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence levels we can see that the proportion of children achieving the CfE level relevant for their age falls throughout the primary stages. So for reading in P1 81% of children achieve but by P7 this drops to 72%. We need to raise the bar.

It is true that by S3, 86% of young people are achieving 3rd level in reading and 86% are achieving the 3rd level in numeracy. But, looking at the

attainment gap, we see that 79% of young people from the lowest SIMD quintile achieved 3rd level in reading, while 93% from the highest quintile achieved the same level. We need to close the gap.

In Higher Education, yes, more pupils from poorer backgrounds are going to university, but it is equally true that they remain massively under represented. We need to widen access.

Our debate therefore must start from a truly informed perspective and focus on what now needs to be done to build upon that strength of performance.

So, I come back to the many voices telling me what the Government should do on education.

I have been critical today of those who would run down Scottish education.

But that is not the only voice raised in the debate. It is striking to me that, despite the range of data detailing the challenges we face, one of the more common comments I hear is from those who say that nothing needs to change.

This comes home most forcefully in the consultation on school governance.

We are still digesting the 1,100 or so responses but already it is clear that there is a strong body of opinion that does not accept the need to change.

And what is perhaps most worrying is that this body of opinion is from within Scottish education.

I want to be clear today that my opinion – the view of the Scottish Government – is clear.

Looking at the data, the status quo is not an option.

Change is needed, change is happening and more change is coming.

The barrier poverty and inequality poses is significant. The challenges of raising the bar and closing the gap are real.

To take them on, we need to reform our approach to get the whole system pulling in the same direction.

In policy terms, we need an integrated framework that meets the needs of all young people at every stage of their journey through life.

That policy framework is provided by the three building blocks of:

- Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)
- Curriculum for Excellence and
- Developing Scotland's Young Workforce.

GIRFEC – because it captures the need to work right across the system, across every agency in support of young people and their families from pre-birth and right through the earliest stages of life into adulthood;

Curriculum for Excellence - which has re-shaped how we deliver education from 3-18 to provide a flexible and child focused curriculum; and

Developing Scotland's Young Workforce – to improve skills for work by extending flexible vocational pathways for young people.

We must ensure that all three of these are woven together to deliver excellence and equity for all of our children and young people.

Most importantly we must move forward with implementing these frameworks and, at all times, continuing to improve outcomes for children and young people.

Achieving excellence and equity for our children is a systemic challenge, one that our whole system needs to respond to. Every child and family is different, so our work with them needs to respond to those individual circumstances.

It needs to start before birth and reach into adulthood. And, it needs to be holistic at every step, disregarding any structural boundaries that might get in the way.

Put simply, our public services need to focus on the individual not their own organisational arrangements.

Later today, a major plank of that approach will be set out in a statement to Parliament by my colleague, Childcare and Early Years Minister, Mark McDonald.

He will lay out the way forward as we expand the provision of free, high quality early learning and childcare from 600 hours now to 1,140 hours by the end of this Parliament.

While Parliamentary rules mean I cannot pre-empt his statement, I can tell you that flexibility, choice and the needs of individual children and families will be at the heart of what he announces this afternoon.

In my former role as Finance Secretary, I brought forward much of the Government's agenda on public sector reform. The foundation of that approach was the report of the Christie Commission, a thoughtful and accessible agenda that encouraged us to focus on early intervention to avoid storing up long-term problems.

In my new role, the value of that agenda was reinforced to me when I attended a Speech and Language Therapists Round Table, where I had the opportunity to hear from Thomas McCrudden.

Thomas told us the story of his life and outlined how he had presented in his very early years with communication difficulties. That unresolved problem led to difficult family circumstances, he became a very troubled individual in his teenage years with the result that he was detained in custody.

It was a situation crying out for a co-ordinated, early intervention approach. It was a situation crying out for a GIRFEC approach.

But what was clear to me from Thomas' experience is that our public services had not intervened where they needed to, despite many signals that he needed help.

That needs to change. Our education system must ensure that the diverse needs of children and young people are met - and met in full.

That is one of the central aims of Curriculum for Excellence. Embedded in it are the values of wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity. In a stroke of imagination and genius, those who designed Curriculum for Excellence took the words that are inscribed on the mace of the Scottish Parliament, the words that have helped to define our democracy in Scotland, and linked them directly to the curricular approach in every one of our 2,500 schools in Scotland.

It is one of our primary purposes to instil those values in our young people and help them to think through their own viewpoints on matters of social justice and personal responsibility.

These values underpin the reason that CfE developed in a way that goes beyond academic attainment and considers all of the four capacities our young people will need to make a success of their lives: successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.

CfE recognises that every child is unique and creates a level of flexibility in the Curriculum to enable every child to achieve their potential. This flexibility is crucial to the achievement of excellence and equity- personalisation means that children and young people get the right support, but also that they get the stretch and challenge that they need.

So CfE allows a level of flexibility which enables us to get it right for every child, ensuring that all children can achieve these four capacities.

This approach is what has set Scotland apart as a global innovator in education.

The OECD review of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) provided a springboard for the next phase of development.

They affirmed that CfE is the right approach for our children and lauded Scotland for the bold approach taken. But it also set us some challenges, particularly to be more specific about the changes and outcomes we want to see.

Our International Council of Education Advisers are in agreement that CfE is the right approach and they have begun to challenge us to think about where we can improve further.

The National Improvement Framework set out a clear vision for Scottish Education:

- Excellence through raising attainment: ensuring that every child achieves the highest standards in literacy and numeracy, set out within Curriculum for Excellence levels, and the right range of skills, qualifications and achievements to allow them to succeed; and
- Achieving equity: ensuring every child has the same opportunity to succeed, with a particular focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

The clarity of the National Improvement Framework has been well received across Scotland and is now beginning to have a visible effect on the education system.

The National Improvement Framework will ensure we have the evidence to show us what is working – and what is not working – in our schools and beyond.

The National Improvement Framework is not an academic exercise, or a collection of data for the sake of having it. The key thing here is how we use this evidence – and further evidence about what is effective practice, both in Scotland and further afield, to help drive improvement for all of our young people. If we are to achieve the defining mission, we must be constantly examining our progress and checking whether we are on track. If we are not making the progress we need, then we must act.

To understand where positive change is being made for children and young people and where further improvement is required we need the best possible data.

We have begun to increase the transparency of performance information about Scotland's schools by publishing the percentage of children achieving Curriculum for Excellence levels in literacy and numeracy on a local authority by local authority, and school by school basis. Initial data in December showed most children are achieving the expected Curriculum for Excellence level for their stage. In future years, these statistics will be informed by national standardised assessments.

This information gives the most detailed picture ever of progress in the Broad General Education across Scotland, as we work to achieve excellence and equity.

We know that schools and local authorities are already focusing on that information and that it is informing their future planning. It will also provide a platform for us to work more closely with local authorities and other partners to continually develop our understanding of where children's progress can be improved and where lessons of good practice can be learnt.

We must use our knowledge of current practice that works - and attempt to discern where that practice is accelerating closure of the attainment gap.

We also need to bring evidence of proven interventions to bear where concerns are identified. In the vast majority of cases there is a strong evidence base for early and effective working with parents and families and for direct intervention with children and young people.

We have great examples across Scotland on interventions to improve early vocabulary and literacy, for nurture within school, for support in secondary schools and beyond that will help young people achieve their potential. These are already in place in pockets across Scotland. We now need to ensure that these pockets of excellence are taken to scale across Scotland.

Education Scotland has developed the National Improvement Hub to support this exchange of practice and it is already widely used amongst practitioners.

We will also be working with the Education Endowment Foundation across the early years and school years to make their international evidence base more accessible.

And our own research strategy will provide a deeper knowledge base to support practitioners.

I want to be clear that all of this data and evidence is being developed for one reason- to improve outcomes for children and young people.

The flexibility that is offered by CfE is crucial to meeting the needs of all children, however, we must also provide clarity in our schools.

In order to maximise the impact of our early years policies and provide seamless support for children, we need to ensure they have experiences in school that will excite, motivate and challenge them.

Since taking this role, I have listened carefully to what teachers and young people have been telling me. I have drawn on the advice of the Teachers' Panel and the International Council of Education Advisers.

The feedback that I have received across the board suggests that a radical de-cluttering of the system is necessary alongside clarification of exactly what is expected from schools, teachers and young people. Teachers must be free to teach.

It is clear that too many documents and too much 'guidance' had accumulated as CfE was implemented. We need clear, simple statements that give teachers confidence about what CfE does, and does not, expect of them. Within that, we need to be clearer and more specific about how children's progress is assessed, signalling when further support is needed.

Based on that advice I have moved to provide greater clarity about Curriculum for Excellence through:

- the advice published by the Chief Inspector of Education in August 2016; and
- the literacy and numeracy benchmarks published in December 2016

I am also reducing bureaucracy and workload by reducing the burden of assessment, both on teachers and on young people through changes to the National Qualifications.

All of these endeavours have been welcomed by the teaching profession.

Today I can confirm that I am continuing with the efforts to tighten and sharpen our education system, with the publication of Benchmarks for all curriculum areas by Education Scotland on its National Improvement Hub.

The literacy and numeracy Benchmarks have already been well received and it is important that we now have the full set for all areas of the curriculum. Benchmarks provide clarity for teachers on the standards our children and young people are expected to achieve within each curriculum area at each level.

Their purpose is to make clear what children need to know to progress through the CfE levels. They will also support consistency in teachers' professional judgements.

And importantly, I know and have heard from teachers and their leaders that Benchmarks will help them to make sure that young people achieve the pace of progress they need and deserve, right across the Broad General Education. If we are able to get the pace of progress and achievement right for every child we will truly achieve excellence and equity.

Teachers, young people and parents will also have much better information on which to decide on the most appropriate levels of National qualifications to follow in the Senior Phase. This will ensure that young people are engaged in the right courses and the right presentations at the right levels.

As well as providing exemplification on the Improvement Hub today, Education Scotland is planning to support local authorities and teachers as they start to use the new Benchmarks.

I have also been working with partners to consider further advice on the changes to our qualifications system. This work is ongoing and I will be saying more about this very shortly.

We know that our workforce is central to achieving our ambitions for our young people and we must invest in our many professionals to ensure we deliver for Scotland's children and young people.

This begins before birth, and the bold ambition of the Maternity and Neonatal review will deliver continuity of care for families during pregnancy, connecting directly with the health visitor universal pathway which provides a consistent route to support for that crucial early brain development up to age 5. We are investing in 500 extra health visitors to ensure that every family is helped to get off to the best start.

We know that effective leadership is key to the success of schools and the children who learn in them. We also know that sustained investment in professional development is central to ensuring we are able to deliver quality learning and teaching.

In June last year I committed to working with the Scottish College for Educational Leadership to bring forward a new package of professional learning for established headteachers.

I am delighted to announce today that Excellence in Headship is now open for recruitment and that it will be backed by £400,000 of Scottish Government funding.

This package of support will be managed by the Scottish College for Educational Leadership and will include opportunities for teachers to strengthen their leadership skills by selecting from a wide-range of programme options including the chance to focus on core themes of critical self-awareness, leadership of learning, leading system change, organisational effectiveness and working beyond the school with community champions.

The programme will also include exciting opportunities to learn from the experience of colleagues in other countries through an international exchange programme.

I am also delighted that the Hunter Foundation recognises the importance of school leadership and has joined with us in supporting this initiative. It's through their investment of £1M over the next four years alongside a further £2M from the Scottish Government that this can be delivered. In the first year 320 headteachers will benefit from this fund and will be given the opportunity to join a transformational leadership programme, delivered by Columba 1400.

The role of headteacher is challenging but hugely rewarding and I want to support teachers to take the step to headship while also committing to supporting headteachers already in post.

Our faith in our headteachers and in our teaching professionals, underpins the reforms we are now set upon. We are committed to empowering schools, teachers, parents and communities.

The reforms that have been undertaken, with the introduction of £120 million in Pupil Equity Funding - directly distributed to 95% of schools - in a focused way to tackle the attainment gap, are an illustration of the direction of our agenda. This reform is creating an empowered profession, able to take decisions that matter to the lives of individual young people in the environment in which they live and are educated. This approach provides the opportunity to take forward proven educational interventions to close the attainment gap. It creates the freedom to establish partnerships with third sector organisations in youth work, youth advocacy and community learning and development to address the wider needs of young people as part of our efforts to ensure every young person is able to fulfil their potential.

But empowering the profession is not an end in itself.

Applying the principle of Getting it Right for every Child leads you to ask, who is best placed to understand and meet the educational needs of individual children. Who knows them? Who is at the heart of their schooling?

The answer is, I think, self-evident: teachers and parents.

That is why I have pledged to make teachers and parents the key decision makers in the life of a school. And, it is why our reform of governance takes as a starting point the empowerment of schools.

Decisions about a child's learning should be made as close to that child as possible. And decisions about a child's needs and how to meet them should be made by those around the child.

This is a vision of empowerment and devolution – devolution from local authorities to schools – to include teachers, headteachers, parents and communities – and devolution from a national to a local or a regional level.

In taking this commitment forward, I know that school governance is one of the most debated areas in education, not just here in Scotland but

internationally.

And I am conscious that any attempt to import what works elsewhere will almost certainly fail.

Our reform must be rooted in the strengths of Scottish education. There is no off-the-shelf answer. It must be made here in Scotland.

The OECD work on governance, however, has much that will inform our reforms. It notes that as education systems face up to the complex problems of poverty and deprivation, successful systems are more likely to be those that are flexible, open and dynamic.

And they identify the key strengths of:

- being focused on processes, not structures,
- being flexible and able to adapt to change,
- building capacity, encouraging open dialogue and stakeholder involvement,
- taking a whole system approach, and
- harnessing evidence and research to inform policy.

We will bring our plans forward in due course – and to Parliament in the first instance – so I will not go into great detail today but I will give these pledges: our reforms will be built on the best evidence of what will work. They will empower schools. They will not take the overly prescriptive, top-down approach so damaging elsewhere in these islands. And they will, rightly, put children and young people right at the heart of school education.

These will be major changes. And I know change is difficult. It would be easy to accept the status-quo. But doing more of the same will not achieve our ambitions for our children and young people and their future. Therefore we will change our approach to the delivery of education. I intend to publish a Next Steps document in June setting out how we will build on the proposals in the Education Governance Review and consult on our commitment to a funding formula.

And, beyond the school gate, we have shown the benefits of reform.

We are blessed with colleges and universities that are world class. They are jewels in the crown of Scottish education.

Our colleges have never been so focused on the needs of the young people they serve. Yes, there are always challenges - national bargaining is still being negotiated for example - but by any objective assessment, our FE sector is in good shape.

That is a result of the hard work of the staff and of the major reform of the sector undertaken in the last Parliament. It was a reform designed to deliver colleges dedicated to improving the life-chances and employment prospects of young people. And anyone looking at the performance of the sector now, will recognise the success that those reforms have delivered.

In our world-class university sector, we will widen access so that more students from disadvantaged backgrounds have the opportunity to go to

university . The appointment of Professor Peter Scott as our Commissioner for Fair Access will provide a clear focus for that work.

And, across both the HE and FE sectors, we are determined to improve the way we support our students through a review of funding that is now underway.

Perhaps most crucially, however, will be our work on the Learner Journey. This seeks to join up the different parts of the system, building better pathways for pupils and students from school to work-based learning, college and university. In this, as in our reforms to schools themselves, we are taking a whole system approach that aims to place the individual at the heart of the reform.

And, to ensure success for our young people goes beyond formal study we will continue to bridge the gap between education and industry, to make sure more young people are work-ready and promote the value of work-relevant learning.

Sir Ian Wood's 2014 report is one of the most important and robust contributions to the Government's thinking on education. It is a clear and compelling plan of action for giving young people the skills, experiences and qualifications they need to move to positive destinations after school, and make informed choices about the jobs and careers they want to pursue.

Developing the Young Workforce is about changing how we work together across the education and training systems to create the best opportunities for our young people: transforming how employers and educators work together to create the workforce of the future; expanding the options for work-based learning and changing how we value that vocational offer.

Whilst there is still more to do I am encouraged by the significant progress that we are seeing first-hand in schools, colleges and with employers across the country, pulling together to give young people high quality, work relevant learning opportunities.

In setting out our plans I will hold true to our vision for Scottish education – excellence and equity – and our commitment to collaboration and co-operation rather than competition; to a system that gives every child a chance to succeed; to a system which supports rather than divides and which places our children and young people at its heart.

All of us need to ensure that we embody not just the letter of these policy building blocks, but the spirit of them. Working together to achieve the best possible outcomes for children and young people. We need our whole system of public services – across health, early learning, schools, colleges, universities - and with third sector partners to work together to achieve our ambitions.

The First Minister has been clear that the defining mission of this Government is to deliver excellence and equity in education. Excellence – we will raise the bar for all; and Equity – we will close the attainment gap.

That must happen in every setting, with everyone who can help – with each

of you - doing your best to get it right for every child.

Let's be bold in all we do and relentless in our pursuit of excellence and equity for Scotland's children and young people.