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**PUBLICATION - SPEECH/STATEMENT**

# Ministerial Statement: Performance in Scottish education

Published: **10 Dec 2019**

Part of: [Education](#)

Deputy First Minister and Education Secretary John Swinney

Presiding Officer, I welcome the opportunity to update Parliament on the latest performance information we have on the Scottish education system.

Last week the PISA data from the 2018 survey was published and this morning we have seen the 2018/19 Achievement of CfE levels data, as well as the 2019 Summary Statistics for Schools, which includes the latest data on teacher numbers. This material provides a range of information which sets out the progress that is being made in Scottish education.

I want to start this statement by paying tribute to the hard work of all the teachers, children and young people in our schools. I visit schools up and down the country and I see at first hand the talents of our young people and the commitment of teachers and other school staff who support them to achieve their potential.

The school census data that we published this morning demonstrates that the action we are taking on teacher recruitment is working.

That data shows that teacher numbers have increased for the fourth year in a row. The number of teachers in our schools has risen by 288 to 52,247 in 2019, an increase of more than 1,500 on 2014.

This represents excellent progress, and we now have a 10-year high in the number of teachers.

Even more striking is that primary teacher numbers are at their highest level since 1980 – the highest level for 39 years.

And I would also draw Members' attention to the figures published on 15 November which indicate that permanent teacher vacancies for primary and secondary schools combined have fallen from 606 to 382 in a year.

The ratio of pupils to teachers, nationally, remains at its lowest since 2013. I am pleased that a large number of local authorities have either maintained or improved their teacher numbers and pupil teacher ratios, and we will continue working with partners to ensure that children in all local authorities benefit.

Our focus on maintaining teacher numbers has allowed local authorities to take flexible decisions about how best to meet the needs of their schools and prevent increases in class sizes. The decrease from 511 to 267 in the number of P1 pupils in classes of 26 or more in 2018 is encouraging and equates to just around 10 classes in the whole of Scotland. The contrast to when we took office cannot be clearer when there were more than 16,000 P1 pupils in classes of 26 or more.

That is real progress but work to further improve recruitment continues. We are supporting universities in the development of new and alternative routes into teaching, including a focus on increasing the number of STEM teachers. These routes into teaching have attracted 800 people, over the last 2 years, who may not otherwise have entered teaching.

We are again offering bursaries of £20,000 for career changers to undertake teacher training in STEM subjects where the demand is at its greatest. A new phase of our recruitment campaign is also underway. We have also added Napier and Queen Margaret Universities as teacher education providers.

And it is also important to recognise the role that other staff have in supporting children and young people in our schools. Our decision to have Counsellors available to support young people's mental health in every secondary school in Scotland, the first of whom will begin work in this school year, is a significant step forward. As is the £15m per year that we announced in the Programme for Government to provide enhanced support to children with additional support needs.

I am also encouraged, Presiding Officer, by today's Achievement of GSE levels data

I am also encouraged, Presiding Officer, by today's Achievement of CIE levels data.

Firstly, I welcome the Chief Statistician's decision to remove the "experimental" label from this data. This is a clear indicator of the positive work that has been done by teachers and local authorities (supported by Education Scotland and the Regional Improvement Collaboratives) to ensure the quality and consistency of teacher professional judgements.

Secondly, I am encouraged that the data itself is positive – demonstrating as it does that Scotland is moving in the correct direction.

The International Council of Education Advisers has indicated to me that we should be aiming to make a series of incremental gains – gains of the type that are now evident in Scotland - in order to deliver sustainable improvement.

The ACEL data provides, for the second year running, increases in attainment across all four of the key outcome measures – for example a rise of around one percentage point in primary literacy and secondary numeracy. The latter is particularly welcome in the light of last week's PISA results which showed that we have more progress to make in maths.

When looking at the data in more detail it shows that in each of the reading, writing, listening and talking and numeracy at P1, P4 and P7 the results on most indicators show an improvement. S3 results show a similar picture at both third level and fourth level.

I am also pleased to see that the data demonstrates that we are making progress on equity. Attainment among the most disadvantaged children and young people rose in numeracy at all stages, and in reading and writing at P1, P4 and P7. The attainment gap between the most and the least disadvantaged has narrowed on most indicators. For example, the gap in P1 literacy has closed by 1 percentage point – it is almost 2 percentage points for P7 literacy.

While the overall picture is positive, there are of course local variations within the figures and we will be working with Education Scotland and local authorities over the coming year to support improvement.

While this is only the fourth year of ACEL data, it is clearly demonstrating that we are on the right track. We are beginning to see the system-wide benefits of the system-wide reforms that we have introduced.

We are seeing some progress towards closing the poverty related attainment gap. This is encouraging and has been further emphasised by the data that we see today.

In order to keep up the momentum, I want to signal to the education system today that the Government will maintain its focus on closing the poverty related attainment gap and we have published an updated National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan

today which sets out that continuity of direction. I am determined that the system should benefit from a clear focus to ensure the improvement work that is being undertaken across the Scottish education system has time to become embedded.

The International Council advised me that the challenge now is to deepen the level of progress and impact and that is what we intend to do.

Turning to last week's PISA results, it is important that Parliament hears accurately the outcome of the survey and what the PISA data showed us.

What we see in the PISA data is a sharp recovery in the results on reading. That is very welcome and it comes from a determination after the last PISA results to make a focus of our attainment challenge on improving literacy.

According to independent statisticians, performance in maths and science is stable.

I do not deny that there is a challenge here. While performance in science and maths is stable and in line with the OECD average, it must improve. And initiatives that we have underway now, such as the STEM Education and Training strategy, or the STEM bursaries, or the work around Making Maths Count are all about making sure that we improve performance there as well.

It is also really important to see the PISA data in context. I have already spoken about the positive CfE levels data and there is a wealth of other evidence.

Performance in Higher exam passes in Scotland is improving, both in terms of the proportion of young people leaving with Highers and the closing of the attainment gap in Higher results. How these things are counted has changed over the years so we cannot always make direct comparisons. But where we can, we find that those getting a Higher or better is up from 50.4% in 2009/10 to 62.2% in 2017/18.

We are now seeing record numbers of young people, from all backgrounds, going into positive destinations. We are seeing more young people from our most disadvantaged communities going into university.

There is a lot of good news in Scottish education. This is a tribute to the hard work of young people and their teachers.

But it is not job done. The Scottish Government remains absolutely committed to ensuring that we continue to see that improvement – sustained improvements across the system.

Teacher numbers are up to the highest level in 10 years. We are seeing incremental gains in attainment across the broad general education. And while parts of the attainment gap

remain stubborn, there are initial signs of improvement.

In September, the International Council of Education Advisers were clear that I should not let the PISA results – no matter what they showed – provide a distraction from the long term goals. The Council advised that, based on the evidence, Scotland is heading in the right direction and taking the right approach to improving education.

I value and welcome that advice. I believe that the direction of travel is the right one – the data supports that view - and our responsibility now is to keep a strong focus on continued improvement. Now is the time to stay the course as per the advice of our experts and that is what I intend to do.

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