

Aberlour's response to the Scottish Government's Empowering Teachers, Parents & Communities to Achieve Excellence and Equity in Education: A Governance Review

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Prepared by Martin Canavan, Policy & Participation Officer

Introduction

As Scotland's largest, solely Scottish Children's charity, Aberlour supports all proposals aimed at improving the educational outcomes of Scotland's children and young people. The Scottish Government's planned reforms to the governance structure within Scotland's education system, to promote excellence and equity for all, indicate a desire to see potentially radical changes to the way in which decisions are made in schools around the allocation of resources, as well as the provision of additional supports and services available to individual pupils to address individual needs. We understand the Scottish Government's motivation to see such changes within education which aim, in part, to address the concerning issue of attainment and the identified "attainment gap".

We believe that to acknowledge an attainment gap is simply to acknowledge social inequality, and therefore we welcome any attempt to implement change which is intended to address the impact inequality has on our children and young people's education. However, we believe that to deliver a system of governance that aspires to excellence and equity for all, and which is in keeping with the underpinning principles of Curriculum for Excellence, there needs to be a recognition of those wider environmental factors which impact upon children and young people's capacity to achieve, such as poverty and disadvantage. It is our experience that it is not simply national education policy, the quality of schools or performance of teachers which influence the educational outcomes of our most disadvantaged children and young people, but more often the challenges they encounter beyond the school gates – at home and in their communities.

Working in over 40 locations across Scotland, we provide services which support vulnerable children, young people and families across a range of settings and contexts. The children, young people and families we support experience vulnerability and multiple challenges on a daily basis as a result of being in care, having complex additional support needs and disabilities, facing issues around dependency, or having experienced significant disadvantage. We see the impact such challenges have on children and young people's capacity to achieve in school every day, and support children, young people and families in whatever way we can to mitigate the worst effects of the challenges they experience. Therefore, we believe this review of current structures of governance and decision making in schools can support schools, partner organisations and other relevant stakeholders to work more closely and effectively together across our communities, in order to provide the necessary holistic family and community support which we believe ultimately can help our children to achieve.

Aberlour has chosen not to respond to the consultation paper in full, but instead to focus on those areas within the paper which are relevant to the work we do and the children, young people and families whom we support.

Strengthening 'the middle' – how teachers, practitioners, schools and other local and regional partners work together to deliver education

It is our experience that those issues which have the greatest adverse impact on children and young people's educational attainment are those which they encounter at home and in their communities, often exacerbated by poverty and disadvantage, such as parental relationship breakdown, chaotic lifestyles due to parental alcohol or substance misuse, and poor parental mental health, amongst many other issues. Regardless how well resourced schools may be, or what qualifications or training teachers may have, it is simply unrealistic to expect schools alone to have the capacity to identify and appropriately support pupils who may be affected by such issues. Therefore, we welcome that the Scottish Government is "**committed to encouraging school clusters and other forms of collaborative working between schools and other partners across Scotland**", as we believe it is essential to ensure schools and headteachers are empowered and supported to seek to develop links and partnerships locally with service providers across other sectors, in order to address the needs of pupils which schools themselves are ill-equipped with either the time, resources or expertise to address effectively.

However, we note the absence of any detail within the consultation paper around exactly how these proposed clusters are to be structured. As the Scottish Government's stated intention is "**collaboration in improving teaching, assessing, and connecting schools to take collective responsibility for each other's improvement and results**", then any structure of clusters needs to reflect those identified principles of collaboration and collective responsibility – across entire communities and not simply within schools. We believe that most often it is those issues and challenges that children and young people encounter away from the school environment that affect their capacity to achieve. Therefore, it is our opinion that if the Scottish Government is aiming to ensure schools and headteachers are encouraged and supported to develop partnerships locally, which are intended to address local issues impacting upon attainment within their schools, then such clusters should include all local partners and stakeholders working together – education, health, third sector, teachers, parents and pupils – promoting collaboration and inclusion throughout their communities. In addition, we also believe the same principles of collaboration and collective responsibility should apply within the governance structures of individual schools to ensure true representation of the diversity of the populations of children, young people and parents which schools serve. We believe such representation and accountability is essential for pupils to be seen as equal partners in their own education, providing opportunities to influence and shape not only their own learning experience but also the environment in which they learn.

The third sector in particular currently provides substantial family and community supports and services within communities throughout Scotland, which aim to address those wider environmental factors which are widely evidenced as impacting upon children and young people's educational attainment¹. The skills, knowledge and experience of the third sector in providing such support can be invaluable in helping the Scottish Government realise its ambition of successfully arresting the current decline in educational performance of pupils from our most disadvantaged communities. Therefore, we welcome the Scottish Government's objective of devolving "**decision making and funding to teachers, schools and communities**

¹ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/closing-attainment-gap-scottish-education>

and to open schools up and ensure that parents, the third sector, colleges, universities and employers can better support efforts to raise attainment”. However, we believe the Scottish Government has a role to play in ensuring consistency from one local authority (or proposed “**educational region**”) to the next, supporting schools and headteachers to engage with the third sector, and other partners, within their communities to ensure there is an awareness and understanding of what supports and services are locally available, which can assist schools in their attempts to improve the attainment of pupils.

We also believe the impact which children and young people’s – and parents’ – mental health and wellbeing has on educational outcomes is often overlooked. However, we know the significance of increased and improved mental health and wellbeing for children and young people and the resultant impact it can have on attainment². We feel, therefore, in accordance with the Scottish Government’s proposed mental health strategy, which aims for greater provision of Tier 1 and Tier 2 early intervention and prevention services for children and young people, that schools and headteachers should be encouraged and supported to develop links with their partners in the health and third sectors to provide and deliver such services within schools. It is our experience that school counselling services are often not adequately resourced to provide the level of support required to address complex issues of poverty and inequality, and the consequential impact those issues have upon mental health, and as a result many mental health issues for children and young people from our most disadvantaged communities remain undiagnosed. Therefore, we believe the experience and expertise of the third sector in providing early intervention and prevention services, which support children and young people every day in such circumstances, can be vital in alleviating the impact of poor mental health on educational attainment.

It is our experience that in some areas there are schools and headteachers who already embody such an approach to developing and supporting local partnerships to address issues which they may not have the capacity to do so themselves. However, it is also our experience that there are many schools and headteachers who do not, presenting an inconsistent picture from one local authority to the next. Therefore, in order for the Scottish Government to achieve “**systemic, widespread and effective collaboration and professional learning across Scotland**”, as well as to embed the required consistency of such an approach necessary to ensure all schools throughout Scotland are appropriately encouraged and supported to develop a culture of partnership working across sectors, it is our opinion that national guidance for schools and headteachers outlining effective practice around collaboration and joint working, designed to support and encourage more effective engagement and partnership working with local partners, aimed to address local issues impacting on attainment, should be developed. The absence of such guidance for schools and headteachers could cause further inconsistency across local authorities around the allocation of resources intended to address educational attainment. Whilst we believe schools and headteachers are best placed to make decisions which address local issues affecting their own pupils’ attainment, guidance which supports them to do so to ensure all necessary support available within their communities is utilised is required to guarantee consistency and prevent a postcode lottery for pupils in different local authorities from receiving the support they need. We also feel that adopting a pathfinder approach to support effective collaboration aimed at building on examples of current good practice and existing working local partnerships, in conjunction with the provision of national guidance, would encourage and empower schools and headteachers to explore different options allowing them to discover what additional supports and services available locally are best for their schools in addressing their own individual needs and issues. We believe such an approach would help to encourage and engender an acknowledgement, within schools and throughout communities across Scotland, that the education, health

² <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/Poverty%20and%20Mental%20Health.pdf>

and third sectors all have a significant role to play in supporting the education of Scotland's children and young people, both within the school environment and in the wider community.

Additionally, it is our opinion this could be further elicited and realised through the development of education focused community hubs or networks, which could operate within the proposed school clusters, with representation from across education, health and third sector partners operating in each locale, aiming to develop closer working relationships and create awareness within schools of what supports and services are available locally, as well as outline to service providers the key issues schools identify as impacting on their pupils' education. We believe this would support the Scottish Government's commitment to **“extending to schools responsibilities that currently sit with local authorities and to allocating more resources directly to headteachers to enable them to take decisions, based on local circumstances”**. If implemented properly, such hubs or networks could map out services and supports available within their area or cluster against the needs of schools, ensuring both a greater efficiency and use of resources in addressing those identified issues, as well as the individual needs of pupils, which impact on attainment. Furthermore, with the commencement of the Named Person Service due to occur in 2017 it would appear practicable that the named person in each school could act as the key representative for schools within each hub or network, as a key function of the named person will be to signpost or refer pupils and/or their families to appropriate services and support³. Therefore, such hubs or networks would provide named persons with the relevant understanding and knowledge of the landscape of existing supports and services available locally.

As a provider of early years services, we understand the adverse impact poverty and disadvantage can have on children's attainment before they even begin attending school⁴. Whilst the provision of early years services is not the responsibility of schools, the Scottish Government's proposals around developing **“school clusters”** and **“educational regions”** outlined within the consultation paper provide an opportunity for a fundamental shift in how the early learning and childcare (ELC) sector and workforce is perceived and understood within the education sector as a whole. We believe the role of an ELC worker is as significant as that of any other educator, supporting pre-school children to develop the building blocks of learning which will provide a foundation for their future education as they move through their early-learner journey. Therefore, we believe that within school clusters there should be opportunities for better links and partnerships to be developed between schools and ELC providers. Developing such links would aim to ensure the individual needs of children are better met and their preparedness for school is better supported by both local ELC providers and schools in partnership. Additionally, such partnership working as the result of effective school clusters could better support individual children's transitions, particularly those with challenging circumstances, aiding their educational and social development and, ultimately, their attainment. Moreover, we believe ELC representation within individual educational region governance structures would allow greater collaboration between ELC providers at a strategic level with their local partners across the education sector. Resultantly, it is our opinion this would only help to develop an approach to education across the sector that acknowledges and supports the role of ELC provision as integral to the educational attainment of Scotland's children and young people.

We largely welcome the Scottish Government's proposals around developing greater collaborative and partnership working both within and between schools, and with other partners across sectors within their local communities. We highlight some caution around a lack of detail within the consultation paper as to

³ <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/People/Young-People/gettingitright/named-person>

⁴ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/education-attainment-scotland-full.pdf>

how some of these proposals may be implemented. However, we believe our outlined approach to collaboration and partnership, coordinated by schools to identify both local needs and those wider environmental factors impacting on their pupils' attainment, and drawing on the experience and expertise of existing family and community supports and services provided by their partners locally, can help to promote greater focus on common objectives across sectors; and, ultimately, aim to not only improve educational attainment and outcomes, but also build stronger, more resilient communities in which all Scotland's children can thrive.

For any further information please contact Martin Canavan, Policy & Participation Officer
Martin.Canavan@aberlour.org.uk