PARLIAMENT EDUCATION COMMITTEE – EVIDENCE ON WOOD COMMISSION IMPLICATIONS

SPTC welcomes this opportunity to submit evidence to the Education and Culture Committee of the Scottish Parliament. Scottish education has been and continues to go through significant changes. The report of the Wood Commission gives the impression of being a further game changer in relation to the way in which we seek to meet the needs of all of our young people during their education, prepare them effectively for life beyond school and equip them with the skills they need to participate effectively in the workplace.

1. **SPTC Background**

   SPTC is a long-standing parent-led charity and membership organisation providing help, advice and support to parents up and down the country. Our focus is on making parental engagement with education as good as it can be, by supporting parents and working with local authorities, schools and other stakeholders to build and share good practice.

   We have had both formal and informal contact with thousands of parents and carers over recent years: they have responded to our surveys, emailed and phoned with their queries and worries, spoken to our team as we work with them face-to-face at our information sessions. Our membership comprises almost 2000 Parent Councils and/or PTAs in state schools, representing tens of thousands of parents and carers.

2. **Committee Questions**

   2.1 *If the Wood report were fully implemented, what the likely impact on attainment in schools would be and which pupils would benefit most.*

   If implemented in a fulsome fashion, all young people should benefit from a more flexible approach to learning and skills development. The current focus on academic attainment in our school system, which often leaves young folk who are not on an academic route out in the cold, should be substantially influenced by the changes put forward in Wood, fostering a culture where all kinds of achievement are valued and the term ‘parity of esteem’ starts to have meaning.

   2.2 *The report aims to significantly enhance vocational content “without splitting young people off into separate streams at school age”. What the disadvantages of such an approach would be and how it could be avoided.*
Over many years, Scotland’s education system has been established as being comprehensive. However, the reality is often that young people are streamed, sometimes from an early stage. Often this is done with the best of intentions: to provide additional support to those youngsters who are struggling. Unfortunately it can lead to a school environment where pupils who appear ‘academic’ and ‘not-academic’ are perceived a fundamentally different, by both staff and pupils. In short, the system fails to address the needs of individuals and instead sees ‘types’ of young people. We believe this is not a helpful approach and one which leads to a two-tier system, whether intended or not.

We therefore agree that we should avoid this approach in our schools and look for a means to provide diverse and appropriate school, college, work and training opportunities for young people working at different levels and with different goals. We believe that ambition is a key component in success: young people themselves and those who are working with them need to have high expectations and positive ideas about what they can achieve.

2.3 Whether any measures other than those advocated in the report are needed to ensure more young people leave school with “high level vocational qualifications which have strong currency in the labour market”.

Teaching and learning - and success as a result of that process - are influenced by very many factors, some of which have been identified in the report. Creative and courageous leadership in schools; high quality, motivated teachers; engaged and motivated learners; involved and empowered parents are just some of the vital ingredients. Wood’s report has identified specific strategies which we believe will support some or all of the above, however success will come from blending and progressing these factors in a way which is right for the individual young person.

2.4 Whether the report – which includes a section on improving equalities – places enough emphasis on pupils’ socio-economic inequalities and how these could be overcome.

It is widely recognised that poverty is the factor which has most impact on outcomes for young people. However, it is not a defining characteristic: young people from deprived backgrounds are not destined to fail. Through their efforts and those of the people who support them, all young people have the potential to succeed. In short, we must have high expectations of all young people.

2.5 Whether there would have to be significant reorganisation in schools to accommodate all the proposed changes (for example, to enable more links with colleges/ to have a greater focus on work placements).

There will need to be a radical overhaul for many secondary schools, which is going to take some time to implement and take root. Given the current issues facing schools – budget cuts, teacher shortages, curriculum and qualifications changes – we anticipate that the necessary changes will present a significant challenge to some. It therefore needs to be recognised that
this work will require specific funding and long term support if it is to really have an impact. In truth, we believe it will also fundamentally change the shape of secondary education as more young people spend less of their time in school classes, and more time in work experience, apprenticeships, college or university. There are implications for the staffing profile of schools which have not so far been addressed. In many cases, staffing will move to alternative provision (e.g., college) but that will not always be the case.

2.6 What action and resources would be required to deliver the specific recommendations aimed at schools and teachers, for example:
- teachers’ skills and knowledge may need to develop in certain areas (for example, “to better understand employability and modern work skills”);
- closer links should be established between schools, colleges and employers (for example, “all 363 secondary schools in a long term partnership with employers within 3 years”).

We do not feel equipped to comment on the specifics of this question, but believe there will require to be specific funding, training and support provided to teachers and leaders in the schools sector.

In Conclusion

SPTC is broadly supportive of the Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce principles: we believe it maps out a programme for positive change to the prospects of a large proportion of Scottish young people. However, we also recognise that its implementation will demand significant change and resources of the Scottish education sector.

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