Mentor Scotland written submission to the Education and Culture Committee regarding the Education (Scotland) Bill – May 2015

1.1 – Mentor is the UK’s authoritative voice on protecting children and young people from the harms of alcohol and drugs, bridging the worlds of academic research, policy and on-the-ground practice. We engage with schools in a variety of ways to embed effective alcohol and drug prevention into practice and, at the same time, to improve educational outcomes. In particular, programmes like ADEPIS and the Good Behaviour Game, which address alcohol and drug issues, return broad educational benefits, including improvements in behaviour, attainment, attendance, and student wellbeing.

1.2 – We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Education (Scotland) Bill, in the hope that it will enable Scottish Ministers to reduce the gap in attainment and improve long-term outcomes for disadvantaged children and young people.

Q1. What improvements in attainment, in achievement and in reducing inequalities of outcome do you consider the Bill in itself could deliver? What would be a desirable level of impact?

2.1 – There is scope for wide scale improvements in relation to educational inequalities, and we believe that the Bill should adopt a broad approach to reducing inequalities of outcome. There is an established link between low socioeconomic status (SES) and educational attainment (Scottish Government, 2013); however there are a multitude of factors that contribute to low attainment – attachment to school and attendance, aggressive and disruptive behaviour, health and wellbeing, alcohol and drug use – all of which should be considered and addressed in policy that aims to reduce inequalities of outcome.

2.2 – Mentor believes that alcohol and drug prevention is a particularly important component in improving overall attainment and in reducing educational inequalities. Adolescent alcohol use – especially frequent use – is a strong predictor of truancy and low attainment (Green & Ross, 2010); further, there is evidence that young people with low SES are more likely to engage in risky alcohol- and drug-related behaviours (Hanson & Chen, 2007; Schreier & Chen, 2010). Reductions in alcohol and drug use, therefore, would both enhance attainment overall and improve attainment disproportionately among low SES students, thus reducing the attainment gap.

2.3 – Effective alcohol and drug prevention returns broader educational benefits. As Ofsted (2012) and NICE (2011) recognise, quality PSHE can increase attachment to school, improve academic performance, enhance social skills, and reduce aggressive and disruptive behaviour both in and outside the classroom; social development programmes like the Good Behaviour Game have also demonstrated long-term improvements in behaviour and attainment, as well as the desired reductions in alcohol and drug use.
2.4 – Adolescent alcohol and drug use is an important predictor of academic attainment, which should be addressed in its own right, especially when seeking to raise the attainment of students from low SES who are more likely to engage in risky alcohol- and drug-related behaviours. Furthermore, there are a number of effective alcohol and drug interventions that also have broader educational benefits. Mentor therefore believes that effective prevention programmes and quality PSHE should be at the heart of measures that seek to achieve reductions in inequalities of outcome.

Q2. The duty in the Bill is to ‘have regard to the desirability’ of ‘reducing inequalities of outcome’. Is this meaningful enough to have the desired policy effect?

3.1 – The wording of this duty means that education authorities will not be failing this duty if they fail to reduce inequality; unless the Bill provides clear, practical measures that education authorities should take to reduce inequality, it is therefore unlikely to have the desired policy effect.

3.2 – The Committee might consider strengthening the duty to ensure that education authorities put in place measures to achieve the desired policy effect. But more importantly, the Bill could go further to provide practical ways for education authorities to raise attainment. By reassessing what interventions are needed to improve educational outcomes and offering guidance to education authorities, there is a much greater chance of ensuring fulfilment of the duty and reducing educational inequalities.

Q3. How should ‘inequalities of outcome’ be interpreted and should this phrase be defined in the Bill?

4.1 – As stated in the response to Q1, Mentor believes that ‘inequalities of outcome’ should be interpreted broadly to cover academic attainment as well as a range of other indicators that influence inequalities of outcome, including attachment to school and attendance, aggressive and disruptive behaviour, health and wellbeing, and alcohol and drug use. These factors impact academic attainment and therefore cannot be separated, as well as influencing long-term outcomes and life chances for young people of low SES. We believe that ‘inequalities of outcome’ should be defined in the Bill to bring clarity to education authorities and to enable authorities to target specific issues to combat educational inequality.

Q4. What specific actions will education authorities be able to take to reduce inequalities of outcome that they are currently unable to take?

5.1 – As stated in the response to Q1, Mentor believes that providing quality PSHE and investing in effective prevention programmes should be among the measures prioritised by education authorities.
5.2 – Evidence suggests that quality drug education, as part of the PSHE framework, can give young people the knowledge and skills to make healthy choices in relation to alcohol and drugs, thus increasing attainment, and also effect broader educational benefits (NICE, 2011; Ofsted, 2012). Drug education in Scotland is currently inconsistent (Stead et al., 2007), constricted by a lack of subject-specific training, curriculum time and central guidance on best practice. As shown by ADEPIS, even a small investment in drug education can deliver a vast improvement in the quality of provision (Boddington et al., 2013). Mentor believes that improving the standard of PSHE could have a significant long-term impact on educational inequalities and should therefore be a key priority for education authorities.

5.3 – Investing in effective prevention programmes has been proven to be highly successful in improving long-term outcomes; while more resource-intensive, the best preventive interventions have extremely positive cost-benefit ratios. Social development programmes, such as the Good Behaviour Game, are particularly effective in reducing alcohol and drug use, improving behaviour and raising attainment – especially when delivered at primary school age. The earlier we deliver such programmes, the less chance the inequality gap has to open up. (By extension, investing in more comprehensive pre- and post-birth support would also make a fundamental difference to the existence of inequalities upon admission into preschool and primary school).

Q9. The Bill focuses on reducing inequalities of outcome resulting from pupils’ socio-economic disadvantage. Should all examples of inequality of outcome be addressed?

6.1 – Yes. Mentor believes that all examples of inequality of outcome should be addressed; however we remain concerned about the capacity of education authorities to achieve this. It will require significant investment to ensure that all children and young people have the same opportunity to thrive. However, as a proponent of prevention and early intervention, we believe that investing in children at a young age – including programmes that reduce alcohol and drug use and promote healthy lifestyles – will return major long-term benefits to society.

Additional comments:

7.1 – Mentor welcomes the Bill’s ambition to reduce inequalities of outcome, which has the potential to transform education in Scotland. While we welcome the contents of the Bill, we hope that this will be complemented by a clear vision of what interventions are necessary to improve outcomes. By equipping education authorities with the practical tools to reduce educational inequalities, there is a greater chance of achieving the desired policy effect.

7.2 – Mentor is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this important piece of legislation and looks forward to engaging further as it develops.
References:


