Call for Evidence on the Education (Scotland) Bill for the Education and Culture Committee of the Scottish Parliament
Submission from the Scottish Youth Parliament

Introduction to the Scottish Youth Parliament

The Scottish Youth Parliament is the democratically elected voice of Scotland’s young people. Our vision is of a stronger, more inclusive Scotland that empowers young people by truly involving them in the decision-making process. Among the strongest youth representative structures of its type, the Scottish Youth Parliament provides elected young people with a democratic platform to effect change, based on a mandate from young people, by facilitating engagement with key decision makers.

Our current national campaign, POVERTY: See It Change It, aims to raise awareness of child and youth poverty, and the right of children and young people to an adequate standard of living. As part the campaign, the Scottish Youth Parliament undertook significant consultation with young people. Nearly 1,000 young people aged 12-25 were surveyed to learn more about young people’s views and experiences of poverty. Many of the young people surveyed raised concerns about the educational attainment gap. The opinions expressed in this consultation form the basis of our evidence, which offers the genuine views of young people, and is grounded in a children’s rights approach.

The Scottish Youth Parliament welcomes the opportunity to submit written evidence to the Committee, and will focus our response on Inequalities of Outcome (Part One) and Provision of School Meals (Part Three).

Inequalities of Outcome

1) 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 improvement?

The Scottish Youth Parliament welcome both the steps taken by the Scottish Government to reduce inequalities of outcome and the educational attainment gap, and the proposal for a legislative commitment for education authorities and Scottish Ministers to reduce these inequalities. Our consultation with children and young people found that 89% of those surveyed believed the extra costs of school would be either ‘very difficult’ or ‘somewhat difficult’ for families living in poverty to afford,
demonstrating that young people see the educational attainment gap as a tangible reality affecting many of their peers.

However, we recognise that ‘reducing inequalities’ is a section of a much wider, diverse bill which covers a variety of legislative changes. Given the critical nature of addressing the educational attainment gap, we believe a formal public consultation on this matter would be valuable and beneficial, as it would allow for discussion and debate on the best approaches to address the educational attainment gap through legislation. Those who experience inequalities of outcome, the education sector, parents, and children and young people themselves must inform and develop this policy. It is particularly important that those with direct experiences of poverty be included in these processes and in the policy-making which follows.

The Scottish Youth Parliament believes addressing inequality of outcome through legislation will be effective if the measures and actions taken as a result of this development are well researched and well resourced, based on input from those disadvantaged by the educational attainment gap, and truly address the needs of the children and young people most affected.

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

The Scottish Youth Parliament does not believe the language of ‘desirability’ is strong enough in this instance, as it suggests that it is not necessary for education authorities and Scottish Ministers to exercise powers to reduce inequalities of outcome, but that it is simply an option if so wished. Rather, we believe the language should require education authorities and Scottish Ministers to carry out functions in the way detailed in section 1 (3). We echo the suggestion of our colleagues at YouthLink Scotland to instead state “due regard for the need to carry out the functions…” , as this would require an assessment of the need in a local area, and appropriate action to address this need.

3) How would ‘inequalities of outcome’ be interpreted and should this phrase be defined in the Bill?

The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that ‘inequalities of outcome’ should be defined in the Bill or in associated secondary legislation. It is important to consider what the desired outcomes are, i.e. educational, socio-economic, health, wellbeing, or otherwise. There must also be due regard for the rights of children and young people, as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, such
as the right to play. Furthermore, it is important to define if ‘inequality’ pertains solely to socio-economic inequality, as referenced in section 1 (3), or if other inequalities are to be considered, such as racial or gender inequality.

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

The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that this is not made clear through the Bill or the Policy Memorandum. While it will place the need to address the inequality of outcome in the forefront of education policy, it is not clear which actions education authorities will not be able to take, and how new initiatives and policies will be researched and funded. Those who are not yet considering actions to reduce the educational attainment gap could be spurred into action. We also hope that education authorities will be encouraged to involve the community, especially those with experience of poverty and inequality, in development of plans to address the issue.

6) Do you consider that such terms are clearly defined and widely understood? Could the different terms used in the Policy Memorandum and in the Bill create any problems in delivering the policy objectives?

The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that it would be beneficial to define the attainment gap, alongside inequality of outcome, to ensure clarity in discussions. In our work, we have found that the terms ‘educational attainment gap’ and ‘inequality of outcome’ can be difficult for some children and young people to understand, and as such would encourage a definition that is more accessible.

7) Should the Bill contain sanctions in the event that the Scottish Government or local authorities fail to achieve the policy intention of reducing inequalities of outcome? If so, what sanctions would you suggest are appropriate?

The Scottish Youth Parliament believes comprehensive and thorough reporting and investigation mechanisms would be more beneficial to ensuring local authorities are actively reducing inequalities of outcome than would sanctions. Furthermore, we are concerned that sanctions may instead reduce the ability of local authorities to help all children and young people achieve. It may also be more appropriate to highlight and share best practice from successful local authorities.

8) Do you have any views on the consultation and reporting requirements set out in this part of the Bill?

The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that more work needs to be done concerning consultation, advice, and support in the proposed Bill. Proper consultation needs to
be well resourced, and make provisions to ensure hard-to-reach groups are included and not further stigmatised. We believe actions should be taken to ensure that key groups, including the parents of children from socio-economic disadvantage, are consulted. We furthermore believe that, in accordance with the promotion of the rights of children and young people, children and young people must be included, especially those who may be disadvantaged by the educational attainment gap. These are the individuals who have the lived experience of inequality of outcome, and their insights are critical to narrowing the attainment gap. Significant efforts should be made and resources allotted (e.g. provided child care) to fully engage and involve them, and make provisions. Unless these groups are included, inequality will continue to rise.

In regards to the guidance requirement, as with section 2 (2), we believe section 3(2) should be strengthened to ensure parents pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are also included. Policies should not be made about these groups without their consultation.

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

As stated previously, we would welcome the inclusion of other forms of inequality of outcome, such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, health, and disability. Inequality can be complex and intersectional, and we believe that all forms of inequality can affect a pupil’s outcomes.

Provision of School Meals

The Scottish Youth Parliament also echoes the concerns of our colleagues at the Poverty Alliance that section 18 (7) does not include Universal Credit as a qualifying benefit for the provision of free school meals. More families with children are being moved onto Universal Credit, and it is important that these children have access to the school meals that may make a significant difference to their health and education. Furthermore, we ask that the Scottish Government consider further a universal provision of free school meals to avoid the stigma associated with poverty, and the bullying and isolation that can often affect children as a result of this.
Cost of the School Day

Additionally, the Scottish Youth Parliament believes the Bill could address the cost of the school day, as stated by the Poverty Alliance. The cost of the school day to families is not limited to meals, and also includes transportation, supplies, uniforms, and school trips. Our consultation with children and young people demonstrated that many children feel stigmatised when they are not able to afford uniforms that fit as they grow, supplies to adequately complete their homework, and school trips with their peers. This negatively impacts their wellbeing, and, as such, their education. Efforts need to be made to reduce the cost of the school day in order to reduce inequalities of outcome.

Conclusion

The Scottish Youth Parliament welcomes the significant efforts made by the Scottish Government to tackle the educational attainment gap and reduce inequalities of outcome, and welcome the inclusion of this in the Bill. We believe it is possible for the Bill to go further in reducing a variety of inequalities, and ask that consideration be given to the suggestions made in our evidence, in the evidence of colleagues in the third sector, and through further consultation with parents and pupils who experience inequality of outcome.

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