

Stewart Maxwell MSP
Convenor
Education and Culture Committee
Scottish Parliament
EDINBURGH
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BY EMAIL ONLY

16th January 2015

Dear Stewart,

Thank you for your letter dated 16 December highlighting the Committee's on-going work on the attainment gap in schools. As you will be aware, I have made tackling this gap one of my top priorities and I am keen to hear from and work with a wide range of partners to make this happen. You had also asked for an update on the Teachers' Pension Scheme (Scotland) (No 2) Regulations 2014. As the lead Minister on pensions, my colleague John Swinney will respond to you directly on that question.

The ambition for raising attainment which is on the Scottish Government website was developed and agreed by a National Strategic Group (NSG), a multi-agency group set up following a commitment by the Scottish Government and COSLA to have a clear focus on raising attainment and fill any gaps in provision that exist. The NSG is comprised of a range of national and local partners, including SG, COSLA, ADES, Education Scotland, Children in Scotland, Barnardos and the Improvement Service.

I will respond in turn to each of the questions you posed, in the understanding that there may be further opportunity to explore these issues in forthcoming sessions of the Committee.

- **To what extent do you consider “inequity” can be reduced and the correlation between social deprivation/ affluence and educational attainment be eroded?**

There is good evidence that some other countries do perform well in reducing the gap in educational outcomes between children from more and less disadvantaged backgrounds. Although it is difficult to quantify exactly, the overall message from surveys such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is that some other education systems can and do make progress in delivering equity in educational outcomes. The 2012 PISA survey showed that we have begun to make some progress in Scotland and I am determined that we build on that.



- **How will we be able to measure whether the Scottish Government's and other bodies' efforts have been successful in this regard?**

In addition to PISA, which includes information about the performance of pupils from better and worse off backgrounds, there are a number of national statistical publications which show how educational outcomes vary according to various different pupil characteristics, including deprivation. For example, the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy presents data on performance in literacy and numeracy by deprivation (using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)). Similarly, the annual Scottish Government publication '*Summary statistics for attainment, leaver destinations and healthy living*' also presents attainment and leaver destinations by deprivation, using SIMD.

- **What is the "agreed period" over which progress is to be made?**

The National Strategic Group did not set a fixed 'agreed period' at national level over which progress in reducing inequality will be made but rather expects all partners involved in delivering education from national to local level to work towards continuous and sustained improvement in educational outcomes. For local authorities and individual schools, this may involve their setting appropriate short and medium term targets which specify progress over time.

- **How will you establish whether the public's and parents' "confidence in continuous improvement of Scotland's education system" has improved?**

I am of course in regular contact with parents bodies such as the National Parent Forum of Scotland and the Scottish Parent Teacher Council, as well as directly with parents themselves, who provide feedback on how they feel the education system is performing.

In addition, the annual Scottish Household Survey includes a question on people's perceptions on the quality of public services, and provides data on the percentage of people who are satisfied with three public services: local health services, schools and public transport.

I believe this combination of regular meetings and the annual survey will provide me with a good sense of whether and how confidence in the education system has improved.

- **The Scottish Government wishes to raise the attainment of all children and, explicitly, the attainment of "children and young people suffering disadvantage". If the attainment of all children rises, then it appears the attainment of those suffering disadvantage would have to rise faster in order for the equity gap to be closed. How is this to be achieved?**

We have always been absolutely clear that we wish to raise attainment for all children and young people, whilst also reducing the gap in educational performance between those from better and worse off backgrounds. Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is well-placed to deliver overall improved, yet more equitable performance. It is designed to offer a personalised approach to all children, which is appropriate to their needs at all abilities and whatever their background. Through CfE, all children and young people are entitled to 'personal support to enable them to gain as much as possible from the opportunities which Curriculum for Excellence can provide'. The evidence shows us that schools are most successful when they have clear and explicit strategies for supporting and improving the performance of their lowest achievers.

I hope you find this helpful and look forward to discussing these issues further in Committee.

Kind regards,

ANGELA CONSTANCE

