Submission from Colin Hunter, Retired teacher.

I am pleased to be able to contribute to this consultation although I am afraid it is rather at the last minute!

I am aware that this issue is being looked at in the context of a considerable number of measures announced in recent times, namely:-

The Access to Education Fund - 13 June 2014

The Third Sector Early Intervention Fund and Strategic Funding Partnerships - 16 June 2014

The Scottish Attainment Challenge backed by The Attainment Scotland Fund - 9 February 2015

I understand that this Challenge draws on the experience of the London Challenge and is aimed at literacy, numeracy, health and well being in Primary Schools.

I believe that there are also 2 further programmes, The Raising Attainment for All Programme, June 2014, and the School Improvement Partnership Programme, launched in 2013.

With regard to the 6 guide questions I hope the following brief observations may be helpful.

Explaining to parents how children learn.

I am sure there will be a great deal of variation in how effectively schools do this and it will depend on the audience each school is reaching out to. Of my own 3 children each one had a different approach to learning and in their cases each one did go on to university.

Flexibility in allowing parental involvement.

As part of the main 3 influences, child, school and parent(s), it is most important to try to have a variety of ways of involving parents to allow as many as possible to be part of a partnership approach to learning. To overcome commitments that can make this difficult, for both the parents and for school staff, more than just a parents evening or invites to assemblies, although important, would be helpful. The help of the Parent Council in reaching out to engage parents and the provision of crèche facilities, which would assist a single parent or parent/carer whose partner is away from home, to make contact with the school could be considered.

Support for parents of pupils from disadvantaged communities.

I see this as breaking a cycle which all too often is perpetuated through the generations. It would be interesting to know the statistics on the decrease or increase over the years of the number of people who are considered to be living in deprived communities. In my early years of teaching in a school which served an area which would be considered to have high levels of deprivation I gained some
insight to the conditions affecting pupils in their homes when delivering and collecting animals from an animal club at the start and end of the school holidays. There was an amazing amount of variation and this school has a Radio 4 presenter and an MSP amongst its former pupils.

Part of the reason for mentioning the above is that for most teachers the home background is largely an unknown and a multi-agency approach is I feel essential to help create the environment needed for the efforts of an effective school to be successful. This I notice is what Question 6 addresses.

Personally I do not have ready access to the evidence and statistics required to address Questions 4 and 5.

I hope that Question 6 is answered by some of the final observations I am going to make.

There is no doubt that parental support for a child’s learning is vital. With all the evidence which points to the first years of life setting patterns which continue throughout life providing additional support as early as possible must be most likely to pay dividends. Inclusive community activities for toddlers and parents can do a great deal to help in the early years. Libraries are doing more to provide regular sessions for stories and rhyme which lets people socialise/network and other agencies can/could use sessions like these to reach out to the community. It is of course the gap that opens up between those whose life is rich in experience and those whose life is blighted, perhaps by a number of factors. The big challenge is surely how to marshall resources in a cost effective way and to determine how schools are best able to contribute.

My own experience is that especially in the early years almost all parents want to see their children succeed. The vision possessed by parents varies greatly and a so do the resources at their disposal. It used to be books but now electronic devices have to be added to the list of factors in play for learning. It is likely that it is at a fairly early age the children overtake the ability of the older generations on the use of electronic devices for learning. This could be a good thing if parents can encourage the youngsters to teach them techniques for e learning! For some children, even some at Primary School level, tutoring comes into play and academic results at some schools owe a lot to this type of support! It will also add to the gap between pupils from different backgrounds.

It will be important in assessing how successful any measures taken are that not just academic attainment features. As well as academic qualifications and the destinations of school leavers it would be useful to look for a reduction in self harming, drug abuse and mental health problems amongst the young and also uptake of sport, volunteering, cultural activities and other pursuits which indicate society offers a good quality of life for school leavers. This will require communities, Councils and agencies to work efficiently in these times of financial constraint to at least maintain community facilities.

I suppose this is just scratching the surface of an issue which has persisted for generations but it is good that a country which values education highly is addressing
the issue.