Dear Mr Dornan,

Pre-budget scrutiny

Thank you for inviting Reform Scotland to respond to the Education and Skills Committee’s call for evidence as part of its pre-budget scrutiny.

Reform Scotland established the Commission on School Reform with the CSPP in November 2011 and the Commission published its report, By Diverse Means, in March 2013. The Commission was then re-convened in 2015 and has continued to meet since then, contributing to the current attainment debate as well as publishing papers designed to prompt a new sense of urgency in Government thinking. Given the work that the Commission is doing, we felt it was more appropriate for the Commission to respond to your call for evidence.

The majority of our response is based on the report, By Diverse Means, and focuses on Education Scotland. That report called for an independent review of Education Scotland’s operation and functions.

Until the reorganisation of local government in 1995/96, it might reasonably have been claimed that educational policy making in Scotland was divided between central and local government. Since that time, however, the role of local government has steadily declined – partly because of the relatively small size and diminishing financial capacity of councils and partly because of the ambitions of successive governments – to the point where strategic policy is, in effect, a national monopoly with local authorities being focused on matters of implementation.

However, even these operational concerns are now heavily influenced by central government and, more particularly, by its agencies and especially Education Scotland.

There are risks inherent in this situation. Close association of government with the detailed guidance issued to schools tends to create defensive attitudes, to impede the establishment of a culture in which constructive criticism is welcomed and thus to reinforce a climate of compliance. It is now generally accepted that the development of detailed guidance on Curriculum for Excellence at the centre resulted in over-complexity, confusion, needless bureaucracy and excessive teacher workload.

The mix of functions currently exercised by Education Scotland has the potential to confuse the role of the national tier of governance. Having development and inspection functions within a single organisation has introduced a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict of interest into the heart of the government’s main educational agency.

Even though their remits were not fundamentally flawed (as is the case with Education Scotland), Education Scotland’s predecessors, the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum (SCCC) and Learning and Teaching Scotland, did not have the full confidence of schools and local authorities. Schools in particular looked to these bodies as sources of assistance, responsive to their needs but felt that they acted almost exclusively to further the agenda of government. This confusion over who was the ‘customer’ undermined the agencies’ credibility.

The extended and conflicted role of Education Scotland has done nothing to resolve this problem. Ensuring that the national curriculum agency is responsive to schools’ perceived needs is all the more
important at a time when Curriculum for Excellence gives schools greater discretion, the use of ICT is becoming more pervasive and the demands of other stakeholders, such as universities and large companies, are liable to increase.

However, while the committee is considering how Education Scotland is performing as part of its pre-budget scrutiny, we believe it is also important that this is not viewed in isolation, but considered alongside the Scottish Government’s current governance review. Depending on the outcome of that review, Education Scotland’s role could change quite dramatically or, indeed, disappear. Therefore, the question of how it currently performs against the outcomes expected of it by the Scottish Government may become less relevant.

The very fact that the Scottish Government is reviewing governance means that the need for an independent review of Education Scotland’s functions and operations is even more urgent.

Yours sincerely,

Keir Bloomer

Advisory Board Member - Reform Scotland
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