EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

SCHOOL VISIT BY COLIN BEATTIE MSP ON 12TH DECEMBER 2016

School Visited: Newbattle Community High School

Colin Beattie MSP held a meeting with a number of teachers and the anonymised note of the broad themes raised is provided below.

Rationale:
Newbattle Community High School (NCHS) is located strategically in the catchment areas for three of the most socially deprived areas in Scotland and within the constituency of Midlothian North & Musselburgh. Some 69% of students are sourced from areas of multiple deprivation. Midlothian was one of the council areas where deprivation increased according to the 2016 SIMD.

Question Headers

Education Authority

- It was felt that generally the Local Authority provided clear direction through annual planning documents; regular Head Teacher meetings and briefings; school group manager visits and quality assurance procedures.
- More support for subject specialists would be helpful in secondary schools.
- The major disconnect is SQA. In recent years qualifications and assessments have been dictating the curriculum and in particular what teachers concentrate on delivering in the classroom to get pupils through examinations. SQA for some reason organise continuous professional learning events simultaneously resulting in significant numbers of teaching staff being pulled out of schools resulting in disruption to learning and additional workload for staff remaining in school.
- For the past 8 years benchmarks have been late and too complicated. “Impossible to get your head around requirements” was one comment.
- There are concerns about moving to 8 regions which may result in three systems with resultant confusion.
- There is a feeling that CfE has “come unstuck” due to fudging and confusion on the part of SQA and Education Scotland.
- Recent moves to clarify benchmarks were seen as a positive move forward.

Governance Review

- In Midlothian six schools collaborate and share ideas. Secondary schools work in trios within Midlothian both challenging and supporting each other in the area of raising attainment and achievement.
- Significant resources are deployed by the Local Authority to ensure that collaboration works well at Associated School’s Group level and in trios of secondary schools across Midlothian.
- Support across Local Authority boundaries is less evident.
- Head Teachers (HT) can currently vire funds between budget headings giving flexibility. HT feels he has adequate control over his budget.
- HT wishes to “lead the school not manage the school”.
- There is concern that more powers for schools could divert management time away from teaching towards administration/budgeting/accounting.

**Attainment Gap**

- Schools which predominantly serve areas of social deprivation require significant extra resource to overcome some of the effects of poverty.
- More time and effort is needed on driving up literacy and numeracy skills.
- Maintaining discipline in this type of school requires significant staffing resource and training.
- Attracting and retaining quality staff in a school with higher levels of deprivation can also be an issue.
- There is a strong feeling that smaller classes result in better outcomes for students. The point was made that arguments/evidence which indicate that class size makes no difference to outcomes actually excludes the vital factor of behaviour on outcomes.
- The importance of reading in attainment was emphasised. Many students had difficulty with words and meanings.

**Teacher Role**

- In a school serving an area of significant deprivation it is important that the pupil teacher ratio is significantly lower than the maximums currently in place.
- There is a lack of availability of teachers for permanent/temporary posts and for supply work.
- Head Teacher role is mostly unchanged but the role of teachers has changed substantially with new complexities in class management arriving in the last few years.
- The creation and employment of Learning Assistants has been of great benefit in supporting young people in their learning; dealing with challenging behaviour; and supporting teaching staff with organisational and administrative duties.
- Teachers need less contact time with students and more time to prepare for complex and often multiple levels of lessons for a single class. For example groups and special needs.
- Not enough teachers are being trained resulting in poor workplace planning. The universities were blamed for placing little focus on this. There is a crisis in staffing – especially in maths, physics, and home economics as a result.
- Some schools have created a “lecture” situation where one maths teacher teaches multiple classes of up to 60 students.

**Additional Support Needs**

- Demands have increased on staff in recent years with pupils with significant needs presume to be capable of learning in mainstream schools and classes. Extreme behaviour is much more common and can be very disruptive and time consuming for teachers and impact on the learning of other students.