Focus group of teachers, trainee teachers and school support staff on workforce planning for schools – 17th May 2017

The focus group involved 16 individuals who had filled out questionnaires as part of the Committee’s inquiry and had indicated a willingness to discuss issues raised further on an informal basis. The Convener, James Dornan MSP, facilitated the meeting with Ruth Maguire MSP.

1) Do you intend to work in schools until you retire and what are the factors influencing your decision?

One attendee suggested that no prospect of promotion in their preferred role of classroom teacher and being at the top of the pay scale was an influencing factor. This was supported by a number of other teachers. One computing teacher who said progression had been ‘flattened’ in the last 10 years so there was a ‘huge gap’ between classroom teacher and PTC. She added that with the amalgamation of departments the number of posts you could be promoted into had been reduced. One English teacher said she had undertaken a masters separate to her role as a means of developing herself as after a few years in her role she felt there was little scope to develop as a professional in school. Her suggestion was that senior leadership teams could have one of the depute roles allocated for a year to different classroom teachers on a rolling basis to give this experience to classroom teachers and encourage them towards headteacher roles in the future.

One headteacher in a specialist school suggested they were due to retire but was concerned due to a lack of experience in her workforce that there was no-one with sufficient experience to take the role over.

A headteacher running two schools, who had previously run 3, highlighted the ‘burn out’ in her role and that it was making her consider other avenues other as she wanted to move away from ‘crisis management’ to go back to teaching. She suggested that when colleagues see her under such pressure it deters them from seeking promotion. A primary school teacher said the excessive paperwork was a deterrent to staying in the profession.

Another teacher suggested his headteacher was ‘obsessed’ with HMIE inspections and lots of work was being generated as a result of that. A secondary school teacher suggested the amount of paperwork to verify your actions to SQA and others ‘come down to professional trust’ and echoed comments made by William Mcleod in evidence about the documents received from Education Scotland and SQA not really reflecting a perception of respect for teachers as professionals.

2) What have been your experience of work placements, either undertaking your own or supporting a trainee teacher undertaking one?

One suggestion was that probationers should have a longer period, 2 years as this would be more of a ‘stability period’ than the current year probation. There was
support for this idea from some of the teachers and trainee teachers, including because it would provide continuity of teaching in schools. There was also mention of the fact that 2 years used to be the standard probation length.

A trainee teacher due to qualify next week suggested 5 week work placements were too short as just as you establish rapport / trust with one group of teenagers in a class you have to leave to go on another placement. He spoke very positively of all of his placement experiences, but said there was limited opportunity for feedback or meeting time with his mentor set aside. He also said the travel times expected of him impacted on his stress levels as it is 1 hr 45 minutes each way in the car. It is also financially demanding as he pays £100 a week travel expenses, rent at his university accommodation and has previously paid rent at a flat close to where he had one placement. Travel is reimbursed by the university.

A primary school teacher suggested supporting trainees was enjoyable but also felt like a burden given her existing workload and there was no additional time allowed for this (it is not in the worktime agreement).

She suggested a number of trainee teachers had a limited understanding of how to teach literacy and numeracy on their arrival on placement. The headteacher of two schools suggested some ‘common thinking’ from universities on the minimum standards we are looking for trainees to achieve on placement would be helpful. A woman in her third year of teacher training suggested that some people on her course did not have the standard needed to teach numeracy and literacy at primary school but acknowledged that higher English was a minimum requirement for her course.

Another teacher suggested during his training the theory did not make any sense until you experienced the practical.

One mature student teacher said her placements were a positive blend of theory and practice and had enjoyed three of her four placements. But she and another teacher highlighted the impact on personal confidence levels if you have one bad placement. Due to a lack of time and other work pressures for school staff on two placements mentioned by trainee teachers, they had not had the required support. One trainee had dropped out of the placement as a result of a loss of confidence. Her university found her another placement where she was well supported so she could complete teacher training. Another said she was used to cover work pressures of the school, being sent as an extra teacher to classes with particularly behavioural issues. One other trainee said she arrived at a school that did not know she was coming for a placement and got very little support in that placement. One teacher said her experience at her school in Fife was that students were well supported and had positive experiences.

A deputy head teacher at an ASN school suggested incentives for those supporting / mentoring those on placements such as pay supplements, responsibility points or a
time allowance would be beneficial changes. She also suggested that work placements could include experience of a school for those with ASN as this would give teachers practical experience of different forms of conditions and support required and also encourage more teachers into specialist schools.

A couple of issues with interviews were raised, including very different approaches being taken by different authorities and also the need to play ‘buzzword bingo’ to secure a post. Also one teacher said they could not get specific feedback where they had been unsuccessful in getting a role and this was borne out by other teachers in the group. There was a suggestion that probationers in schools should be interviewed first when allocating roles to save advertising posts and also to ensure a school’s investment in a probationer ‘pays off’.

There was a discussion about the extent that inconsistencies in approach are an issue with the Convener highlighting the challenge of ensuring conformity of approach but also enabling sufficient autonomy for schools (and teachers within schools).

One recently qualified primary teacher suggested there needed to be much more time in nursery education for trainees (1 week was deemed insufficient).

3) What could improve recruitment and retention in schools?

A lack of supply teachers was highlighted as an issue, particularly in a school teaching children and young people with sensory impairments. There was a lot of support from those present for improving pay and conditions for supply teachers.

There was a suggestion from a recently qualified teacher that the Pupil Equity Funding allocation was impacting on the timing of posts being advertised – this was highlighted by one teacher but there were no other comments to suggest that this was a more widespread issue.

The issue with recruitment was terms and conditions including maternity and sick pay conditions and overall pay levels – these comments attracted wide support. One teacher said if he had not received a salary increment on gaining chartered status under the old system he would not have been able to afford to remain in teaching.

A retired primary school teacher said they loved their job but had retired early because they were financially able to do so and also they were ‘overwhelmed by the paperwork’ and hadn’t had the time to have things sufficiently prepared for lessons due to the number of emails she had to deal with.

The suggestion from one person working in a secondary school was that a large proportion of children coming to school from primary schools struggle to read and write. Primary teachers suggested that support in the home including encouraging children to read was necessary as well as support from primary school teachers. The expectation that teachers were responsible for the wellbeing of children and the
extension of the role of the teacher to cover much more than subject teaching was highlighted by primary and secondary school teachers. Societal and parental expectations were mentioned by a number of the attendees.

One teacher cited her husband’s experience working in a special school and suggested that he has a very physical role that requires more support otherwise people in these roles will certainly ‘burn out’ well before retirement.

4) What is the impact of staff shortages or reductions in staff?

The impact of staff shortages or reduction in posts was discussed. Senior management covering classes in addition to their ‘day job’ was mentioned by a number of teachers. A computing teacher said class sizes had been increased to 30 as her subject did not have a set teacher: pupil ratio. On that basis the school has been able to reduce from two computing teachers down to one. There is now no computing being taught to S1-S3 despite it being required by the Es and Os.

A secondary school teacher suggested he had taken pencils from IKEA because his pupils don’t have pencils of their own. He suggested when trainee teachers see what teachers have to manage in the classroom they are put off teaching. However he also said his school was held in high esteem for its support for pupils with certain additional support needs.

A secondary teacher said that protecting frontline services can’t be at the cost of support staff.

5) What questions would you like to put to the witnesses attending on 24th May?

For Cosla / ADES:

- Why are schools still run by education authorities?
- What planning do education authorities have for long term leave like maternity leave, or in anticipation of people taking planned retirement?
- Why are schools required to use the myjobscotland portal? [an example was given where a small school wanted to hire a support assistant and advertising centrally generated 300 applications which made for a disproportionate amount of effort to fill that role]

For Education Scotland:

- Do Education Scotland and SQA communicate with each other? [context being the perceived disconnect between BGE and the senior phase]
- Do you consider that the documents issued to teachers suggest Education Scotland [and SQA] treat teachers as professionals?
• Why has my school been inspected 5 times in 6 years with contradictory advice given each time? [the suggestion was that the specialism and interest of the inspector has a large impact on the findings]
• When headteachers are given more requirements on their time, can you make clear what you want them to prioritise and what work can fall by the wayside to make way for new requirements?

For the GTCS:

• Why is the amount of paperwork / online work increasing to verify teachers’ actions? [the suggestion was that teachers should be trusted to meet the standards and also subject to peer assessment and line management]
• Do you appreciate how time consuming the online Personal Review Development is, in particular compared to the old hard copy system? [suggestion was that recent changes had increased workload further]

NB If SQA had been in attendance a number of teachers would have raised issues with the guidance offered by the SQA, with one seeking clarity on what needs to be achieved to get different pass marks. This comment received wide support. Another asked about the timing of the National 5 changes and how these co-ordinated with National 4 course content. Another teacher expressed concern over teaching a course with no sight of a specimen exam paper. Finally, there was a suggestion that there was too big a gap between National 5 and the requirements of Highers. [This focus group note will be issued to Education Scotland for reference]