

## **EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE**

### **THE SENIOR PHASE OF SCHOOL: HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE PURSUE THE RIGHT PATHWAY FOR THEM**

#### **CONNECT**

##### **1. Background**

Connect (formerly SPTC) is delighted to respond to the call for evidence from the Parliament's Education and Skills Committee on the subject of the progress being made on implementation of Developing Young Workforce.

Connect is a long-standing independent parents' group and a registered charity which provides support to parents and carers all over Scotland. We provide membership services to Parent Councils and PTAs, as well as offering advice and information to individual parents who have concerns about any aspect of the education of their child, or the wider education system. We support education professionals in developing their skills and understanding around effective partnership working with families and the wider community.

In order to prepare this submission we have carried out desk research and asked for comments from parents through our social media channels. We have also tapped into the experience and information gleaned from our own staff and volunteer parent and teacher directors.

##### **2. Supporting Varied Pathways**

One of the most significant aspects of CfE which was enthusiastically received by parents was the promise of flexibility and personalisation for children and young people in terms of their learning and curriculum design. It appeared to open up the possibility of a more personalised curriculum: one which did not simply focus on academic attainment but recognised the many varied – and valuable – pathways that should be open to all youngsters as they move into adult life.

The reality of what has been achieved so far is amply illustrated in the Committee's own research among young people, and elsewhere (eg Curriculum for Excellence and the Early / Middle Secondary Curriculum in Scotland: Lessons Learned or Forgotten? Jim Scott, School of Education and Social Work, University of Dundee). Connect has long bemoaned the fact that the secondary sector has largely remained unchanged in the face of CfE: with few exceptions schools has not embraced the opportunities to open up the curriculum but continue to focus on SQA qualifications and university as the target next step.

Too few offer different routes and truly build coherence between the Broad General Education (BGE) and Senior Phase which embraces school, college, training and

volunteering in a holistic way, thus meeting the needs and aspirations of the widest possible range of youngsters.

We believe the way in which Senior Phase has been constructed (ie outwith the benchmarks, Experiences and Outcomes etc which gave direction), combined with lack of leadership and clear direction, has led to the message of change has been largely silenced by the power of the status quo.

The secondary sector knows it will be measured on its SQA results: instead of being one of the drivers, the significance of results appears to have grown in importance to fill the vacuum left by lack of leadership for change.

While DYW is embraced by many as a concept, the reality is somewhat different from the vision: again this is due to lack of clear direction and leadership so that the entitlements young people have (eg Career Guidance) have no equivalence to the requirement for exam passes and a 'positive destination'. Skills Development Scotland has no authority to push change through our school system or make schools take cognisance of the market intelligence held regarding future workforce requirements. A small number of individual schools have implemented creative approaches and some local authorities have produced positive policies and working models in an attempt to shift practice in schools, but a search of the National Improvement Hub demonstrates how limited and early-stage these approaches are.

### **3. Early Leaving and Additional Support**

It is a real life and learning experience for young people to face challenges and difficult choices as they move through school and into adulthood, however it is not acceptable for so many of our young people to be ill served by the system. For young people with additional support needs and those who are in the group who leave school at the first opportunity (eg Christmas leavers) the system is self-evidently failing to deliver.

The impact on the lives of the young people who leave our schools with no adequate destination or long-term prospects, and the cost to society, is simply unacceptable. The answer for many young people in these positions is often multi-layered and involves many partners: where the focus of schools is on qualifications and tariff points, these young people very often fall through the net and support (much less good support) is an after-thought. Even when there is a multi-disciplinary approach taken, the various agencies involved are often under extreme pressure of time and resources, resulting in a quick fix approach.

Parents report inadequate transition planning, few or limited choices beyond the well-trodden path to supported college courses which offer no prospect of employment in the future, and a feeling of being left to their own devices after school. We know the unemployment rates for young adults with disabilities is shockingly

high, leaving them dependent on the state, living on low incomes and with their skills squandered.

#### **4. The Parent Perspective**

The variation of what is offered to young people across the country in terms of the curriculum and options both in and post-school is unacceptable, as is the continued firm focus on University as the preferred next step. This leaves many young people feeling disengaged and disinterested in school and learning and, as highlighted earlier, is a significant waste for all.

Parents want the best for their young people but they very often rely on school and the network of supports which surrounds school, to deliver where they feel ill-equipped to do so. As with so many aspects of successful achievement in the school environment, the need is for strong partnership working and coherence across the supports, with families being closely involved. In those schools which do embrace a wider curriculum, parents feel that their children are being supported as an individual to fulfil their potential, whether that be in routes into work, training, volunteering or further or higher education.

The work to engage parents and harness their support must be done locally and have the commitment of local school leaders if it is to be successful.

#### **5. Connect's Recommendations:**

- I. Introduction of clear requirements and frameworks for the secondary sector to provide the entitlement of young people to diverse pathways for all.
- II. Ensure that the message and practice around diverse pathways is coherent across BGE and Senior Phase, commencing in early years.
- III. Creation of a clear title for this programme which gives a positive message to young people, families, employers and schools. Vocational is not the appropriate word as it is (wrongly) associated with non-academic and second-class study.
- IV. Place a requirement on secondary schools to identify and empower a member of senior management with the role of ensuring the diverse pathways are enabled as a right for all young people, involving parents and families as well as employers, training organisations, third sector and colleges in a partnership approach.
- V. Most parents receive their information about education from their young person's school: the message to parents must be on the range of options open to young people, their value and the long term benefits (based on evidence) of acquiring the skills needed by employers and the economy of the future.
- VI. Vulnerable young people – whether by dint of their additional support needs, learning difficulties or social circumstances – require to be given the support they need to find their place and make a contribution to society. This requires

resources and time but that cost is far outweighed by the long term financial and social cost of not providing the support. The requirement to engage the range of partners – including parents – in the planning process from an early stage is critical.

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