

Briefing on ...

Improving education in Scotland

Introduction

The Scottish government's education plans laid out in the Concordat with COSLA were:

- Reduce class sizes to 18 for P1 to P3 "as quickly as possible" and "access to a teacher for every pre school child".
- "Make substantial progress" towards a 50% increase in pre school entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds.
- Pilot free school meals for all P1 to P3 pupils, full implementation by 2010 if pilot successful.

This briefing looks at the class sizes pledge and the effectiveness of this in achieving the policy objectives of reducing inequality and raising attainment.

Funding

The Concordat between COSLA and the Scottish Government included the above commitments in return for a reduction in ring-fencing and a freeze in the council tax. Individual authorities lay out their plans in Single Outcome Agreements

between themselves and the Government (see briefing 196). There was no ring-fenced funding for any of the policy agreements and councils were free to set their own priorities and timetables.

Implementation

The main challenges to delivery are cost, logistics and current legislation. Reducing class sizes is not just recruiting more teachers. There needs to be extra classrooms. These need to be fully equipped with chairs, tables smart boards etc. Each extra class has to have a time slot in order for that class to use the gym hall, IT room, libraries and other non class based activities. There may also be a need for extra admin support or changes in the management structure of the school.

This policy may well lead to larger classes in P4-7 to make space for extra classrooms for P1-3 impacting on learning in the upper school. Many schools will also not have the funding/space to keep the 18 pupil groups all the way through the school. Class groups will have to be reset after P3. Changes to class groups are very

unsettling for children. Glasgow City Council estimates that it would need 186 more classrooms and 397 more teachers at a cost of £57m (SPICe briefing April 2008) to achieve a limit of 18 pupils in P1-3. The Herald stated the cost for Edinburgh and Glasgow together would be £90m.

Education authorities have opted to limit school rolls in order to meet class targets. Parents of children refused a place at the school of their choice, have however challenged and won. The class size limit is not backed by legislation and the current limit is 30. Authorities have asked the government to bring forward legislation to reduce the limit and therefore allow councils to limit pupil numbers. The formal consultation on this issue was due early this year but has not yet been published.

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Further info

Scottish Parliament (SPICe) briefing on Class Sizes <http://www.scotish.parliament.uk/business/research/briefings-08/SB08-18.pdf>

Briefing 196 Single Outcome Agreements <http://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/briefings/singleoutcomeagreements196.pdf>

Guardian <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/mortarboard/2009/feb/24/nick-clegg-class-sizes>

CPPR briefing Series No 1 Spending on School education http://www.cppr.ac.uk/media/media_133107_en.pdf

How effective are smaller class sizes?

Since 1997 class sizes in Scotland's primary schools have been reduced. The average class size is now 23 and 52% of children in P1 to P3 are in classes of 25 or fewer. Further restricting class numbers from early years to 18 will be expensive. As stated before it will lead to some children being refused places at the school of their choice. The key question is whether the cost and disruption will lead to increases in attainment and reductions in inequality at a level that justifies the costs.

This is a heavily researched policy area. There are **no** clear links between small class sizes and improved

learning outcomes. What is clear is that teachers are very keen on smaller classes believing it gives them more time to spend with individual children. There is no evidence that this extra time improves outcome for the pupils. An article in the Guardian reviewing research indicates a small effect on attainment in early years but slightly increased issues between children. It appears that not all teachers make good use of smaller class sizes and many do not change the way they teach. It appears that it is the skill/approach of teachers that has the biggest impact on pupils.

Effective policies

The OECD policy priorities are

- Emphasise teacher quality over teacher quantity
- Ensure teachers have the best skills by making entry more flexible and making the criteria for selection more rigorous.
- Ensuring strong leadership within schools
- Continual development of teachers skills

Class size is only one factor affecting attainment. Investment in initial teacher training and ongoing professional development of teachers are more effective way of increasing attainment than reducing class sizes. The Scottish Council for Research into Education states that there are other approaches which are more cost effective ways of providing young children with more individual attention. As well as teacher training, one to one time with a teacher and classroom assistant and peer tutoring also works. It was also indicated that

for those children who were struggling, home visits, social workers in schools and more educational psychologists may be more effective ways to improve their outcomes.

Glasgow City Council found "nurture classes" to be more effective than reducing class sizes overall. These give focused attention, including their social and emotional needs, to those who are struggling. There is also evidence that improved intervention in the pre school years is effective. The Curriculum for Excellence promotes early intervention but the current education debate focuses on the narrow debate around class sizes.

UNISON members (midwives, health visitors, and nursery nurses) are in fact the key workers in the areas where the evidence is clear that money spent will make a difference. The vital role of classroom assistants in supporting teachers should also not be underestimated.

Action for branches

UNISON is particularly concerned that councils will focus on reducing class sizes rather than introducing free school meals or investing in expanded nursery hours as budget cuts impact on their plans. We believe that these will be more effective in tackling inequality and raising attainment. We are also concerned about the impact on classroom assistant job numbers. The

Single Outcome Agreement will indicate your council's priorities. Please send any information you have on your councils plans to Kay Sillars at the P&I Team in UNISON House k.sillars@unison.co.uk.