



# **Education Scotland Bill**

## **Response to the Call for Written Evidence from the Scottish Parliament Education and Culture Committee**

**The UNISON Scotland Submission to the Scottish Parliament's  
Education and Culture Committee**

**May 2015**

## **Introduction**

UNISON is Scotland's largest public sector trade union. UNISON members deliver a wide range of education services: nurseries, primary schools, secondary schools, further education colleges and universities as well as careers advisors in Skills Development Scotland. Our members are also midwives, health visitors and social workers. UNISON is able to analyse and collate their experience as service users and staff to inform the policy making process. UNISON therefore welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to Education and Culture Committee.

## **Evidence**

UNISON welcomes the commitment to tackle the attainment gap in Scotland. There is clear evidence those children from low income households do significantly worse at school than those from better-off households and that this gap starts early and grows. There is also widespread agreement in Scotland that this gap is unacceptable. It not only harms the individuals who do not achieve their full potential but harms our whole society and economy. While UNISON has no real issues with the content of the Bill we are concerned that it contains no specific policies or funding focused on achieving that aim.

Educational inequality is a long standing problem in Scotland, in the UK and round the world. This is not the first government aiming to tackle it. The challenge requires focused, funded solutions both directly in schools and through a range of public services. Countries, like Finland, that have closed the gap have closed the actual economic gap too. Education services cannot on their own reduce the impact of poverty and inequality but nor can the economic gap be an excuse for not taking action within education. UNISON would like to see the Bill introduce a programme containing a range of evidence based strategies. This does not mean we advocate a top-down one-size-fits all approach. Local authorities must be able to choose to implement strategies that best suit local challenges. These should not only be implemented in schools but also through other public services.

Finnish schools frequently top the world rankings not only for achievement but also for equity. In Finland they ensure: fair funding for all schools; school readiness through universal childcare and pre-school; focus on individual's well-being in schools and prevention rather than repair. In Finland, like Scotland, most education institutions are maintained by local authorities or joint municipal boards. There are no private schools, no grammar schools, no religious schools and no academies.

While many countries have recently focused on more testing, extra hours in class and more school choice Finland has taken the opposite route. Children have less school hours, less homework and less testing than most other countries. Children go to their local state school. There is no "choice". Finland focuses instead on collaboration, personalisation, equity and trust based professionalism. Teachers and their students are not constantly tested and inspected: wasting hours on form filling and exam prep. There are very few exams. Schools are not in competition. Finnish children do consistently well across all schools. Sweden, on the other hand, has seen its both results and equality fall as it moved to embrace the "choice" agenda.

The OECD<sup>i</sup> policy priorities to improve educational attainment 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 teacher's skills

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 effective. These give focused attention, including social and emotional needs, to those who are struggling.

It is important to note though that Finnish success in world education rankings is not just about their school model. It is a country that values social cohesiveness, Finns pay relatively high taxes which provide the money for high quality services, which all contribute to the well-being of their children. Their investment in early years and childcare also means that when children start school aged 7/8 they start on a much more equal footing than their Scottish peers.

Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation<sup>ii</sup> also points out that “the quality and quantity of attainment data from primary and early secondary school pupils [in Scotland] vary widely. This makes data-driven project design and evaluation difficult”. If we are to succeed with evidence based policy making the Scottish Government needs to get much better at ensuring that the mass of data collected in our schools and education departments is collated and more importantly, available for researchers to analyse. We need a national evidence base of what works. The Rowntree report indicates that by age five the gap between children from low income and high income households is between 10 and 13 months. By age 12-14 pupils from better off areas are more than twice as likely to do well in numeracy as those in the most deprived areas. Parental socio-economic background has more influence than the school attended.

The Rowntree report suggests the following as routes forward

- High quality full day pre school education
- Parental involvement programmes
- Literacy teaching
- Children working together in small groups
- Nurture groups
- Academically focussed after school activities
- Peer tutoring, meta-cognitive tutoring and one-to-one tutoring
- Mentoring
- Professional development for teachers
- Targeted funding
- Evidence based whole school reforms

Given the shortage of Scottish data the recent Department of Education report <sup>iii</sup> based on an extensive longitudinal study of children from pre-school to age 16 provides useful evidence.

### Key findings:

- Enduring legacy of pre-school: the positive effect of high quality pre-school lasts up to and beyond compulsory education. This is most significant for relatively low earners. Attending a pre-school (or not) was a significant predictor of higher grades in GCSE
- The difference represented is equivalent to getting 8 GCSE at C grade as opposed to 8 at A grade. The effect is stronger for those whose parents had low qualification levels. High quality preschool was also linked to better self regulation, pro-social behaviour and lower levels of hyperactivity
- Even after controlling for individual, family and neighbourhood influences and GCSE results, children who attended a high quality pre-school had a “greater likelihood of” entering the most demanding academic route.
- Interestingly “positive relationships with teachers” and to a lesser extent “teacher professional focus” had a significant impact on GCSE scores and academic progress in maths in secondary schools.
- The strongest predictor of exam success is family influences. While there is a significant gap between exam scores of children receiving free school meals and those not (a full grade in English or Maths) family income and socioeconomic status while significant have a weaker effect than parental education. Again while “place poverty” or living in a deprived area both predict poorer exam results over and above family status, it is still a weaker influence than a student’s own family demographics.
- Learning opportunities at home and outside school: “the current capacity of students’ families to support academic enrichment activities had significant effects on GCSE scores and on social behavioural outcomes.” Enrichment activities include independent reading or educational visits outside school. So while there has been previous support for school support for these types of activities for younger children there is a strong argument for similar activities for those in secondary school.
- Girls’ success at school doesn’t translate into later life: they outperform boys consistently but boys aspire to higher status jobs than girls with similar exam scores.

There is no evidence to back up claims that low levels of aspiration amongst children from poorer economic backgrounds contribute to their lower academic achievements. Over two thirds of children receiving free school meals aspired to go to university. Choices of ideal job did though still show strong gender stereotyping.

High quality childcare is clearly very important and while we welcome the Scottish Government promises of further expanded hours we are concerned that this has not been properly costed or funded. The current system is expensive, complex and hard to navigate. This further disadvantages those on low incomes. There is still an early years education and childcare split in much of the discussion that takes place and for many families, particularly those on lower incomes or seeking work there is no access to a service that is either affordable or has hours that mean they can go to work. Scotland needs a comprehensive childcare strategy. To provide high quality childcare requires qualified staff and continued professional development for those staff. The most cost effective way of providing this service is in the public sector paid for via taxation.

Academic enrichment activities are effective in improving attainment. Cuts in local authority budgets are increasing charges for a range of activities and outings either provided directly

by the councils or through increased letting charges for local authority facilities hired by private/voluntary providers. School trips whether for a day, afternoon or a week are increasingly costly again reducing the ability of children from low income families to participate. There is evidence that children from low income families do not even ask parents if they can participate in activities which require payments as they don't want to put pressure on their parents for money as they know the stress and hardship that trying to find the money or saying no would involve for their parents. Children from better off families are able to undertake a range of activities: sports clubs and outdoor activities, visits to museums, galleries and theatres and trips abroad either provided directly by their parents or via schools which boost their educational attainment. Going to see a live play makes it much easier to get good marks in English than just reading it in a book or out loud in the class. Those who have the least opportunity to undertake these activities out of school because of lack of money need to have these opportunities through school. One route to closing the gap would be to ensure that participation in all school activities is free at the point of use.

We also need to be much clearer about the difference between the impact of poverty/low incomes on parents choices and ability to support their children and the impact of having parents (from across the income range) who neglect, abuse or provide inadequate support for their children. It's insulting to the heroic efforts of the majority of low income parents, who work hard and sacrifice many things to give their children opportunities, to treat them as if they are careless or neglectful.

UNISON believes that career' advisors have a fundamental role to play in supporting young people in making the most appropriate choices to achieve their full potential. In terms of closing the attainment gap they can ensure that those without parental contacts get an understanding of the range of careers they can aspire to and have a realistic understanding of the routes to achieve those goals. Careers advisors also have a role to play in breaking down attitudes which perpetuate issues like gender segregation in the jobs market and the resulting gender pay gap.

UNISON has consistently argued that targets can and do change behaviour so getting them wrong can have the opposite of the intended effect. The 48 hour target for GP appointments famously led to many GPs only offering appointments within that window preventing people from making appointments further in advance for non urgent issues like routine screening, holiday jabs etc. We would therefore welcome greater clarity on what the "inequalities of outcome" means, and on how that will be measured. Gaps can be reduced by bringing up the bottom, strengthening the middle or reducing the top. We assume the aim is not to reduce the achievements of better off children but not stating this could lead to issues.

The aim of the Bill appears to be improving lives. What isn't clear is what will happen if targets aren't met: punitive sanctions put in place may merely reduce resources available to invest in services.

### **Conclusion**

UNISON believes that tackling inequality and its consequence, like the gap in educational attainment, are vital. We are very pleased to support the Scottish Government commitments to that aim. UNISON believes that the Bill should contain specific polices and funding commitments to deliver on that aim and is concerned that as its stands it will not deliver. This

will require resources. There is no indication that the resources needed are being calculated far less allocated. UNISON welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the committee.

**For further information, please contact:**

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<sup>i</sup> OECD Education Today Perspective January 2009 in Scottish Government Budget Options page 10  
Briefing Series No 1 SPENDING ON SCHOOL EDUCATION CPPR October 2009

<sup>ii</sup> Closing the Attainment gap in Scottish Education E Sosu and S Ellis May 2014

<sup>iii</sup> Student's education and developmental outcomes at age 16: effective pre-school, primary and secondary education project K.Sylva et al September 2014 Department of Education