

ADES Response to the Education and Culture Committee on Scotland's Educational and Cultural Future

In considering the future for Scottish Education after the independence referendum, the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland believes a wide consideration of the education system is appropriate. Having reformed the curriculum, the qualifications system and the teaching profession to meet future needs for Scotland, it is now time to consider the system and its structures as a whole and in particular the learner journey.

Scotland has a long tradition of local management and provision of education on egalitarian principles, balancing the aims of giving individuals opportunities and skills to thrive, with the needs of communities, the economy and the well-being of the nation.

ADES supports the principle of subsidiarity where decisions are best taken at the most local level unless there is a compelling or overriding reason (eg reasons of fairness or equity or economies of scale) to do otherwise.

One example of this is the planning of school infrastructure and school admissions which is very much a local matter which requires strategic and democratic governance at a 'regional' and to some extent a national level.

ADES believes that all the roles, functions, obligations and purposes of an education system can and should be organized with this kind of approach, such that a 'best fit' can be achieved between neighbourhood; regional/council wide; and national levels. Legally, local councils are responsible for education policy but national government is arguably more prominent in actually leading the education system at a strategic level in Scotland: this may be anomalous but rarely presents insurmountable problems.

Local decision-making implies strong engagement of the pupil voice in the management of the school in order to reflect pupil needs and to prepare young people to be active citizens. It also means using all the community resources (including parents) not just to influence the running of the school but to contribute to its purpose of improving and enriching the opportunities for growth and development at individual and community levels. This implies that parents, adults and local communities including commerce, business and employers generally share the responsibility for education.

ADES believes there is considerable scope for developing more and deeper engagement of partners locally but also regionally and nationally.

Local accountability is very important for such a significant, universal service as education – not least because it is so closely related to success and well-being for individuals and for society and to local and national culture.

However, a careful balance has to be reached between individuals, schools and even whole areas taking decisions that are in their best interests as they see them; and the 'greater good' and the needs of others. Scotland tends to take a 'conservative' or egalitarian view on the idea of independent or 'free' schools and historically, has resisted policies that could allow much more autonomy for schools. Whilst this can (rightly) be seen as a strength of the system, it can also act as a restraint on radical or innovative practice making whole system change very difficult.

Similarly, a crucial balance has to be found between a professional view about what is best or most efficient and a political one: for example, school closures or class sizes.

Clearly, people need locally delivered education and children's services where accountability is accessible and transparent. However, the Scottish Government may want to consider how far parents and local councillors and MSPs are truly involved in long term strategic planning for education and children's services; and how well are they, or is Scotland, equipped or structured to meet the significant challenges that face us today eg closing the attainment gap between the most disadvantaged children and their peers whilst continuously raising standards; or ensuring positive outcomes for all young people.

If for example, it can be shown that there are good educational benefits to starting formal education at a later age; re-configuring the school day and the school year to maximize learning; re-structuring the pathways from age 16 through to the completion of further and higher education, how would such a consideration be managed; how would the local democratic voice be engaged in such proposals; and how could it be balanced with professional, political and other perspectives to reach the best outcome for the future? In other words is our current view of 'accountability' in education and children's services a somewhat limited one, which in turn limits the scope of the debate and the ambition to develop towards a world-class education system?

Local and national priorities are generally well accounted for and reflected in a school's planning processes and also at community planning and council level.

Often the tension surrounding 'priorities' relates to a feeling that there are too many of them; that they are not always coherent and integrated; and that resource challenges will determine the extent to which priorities are supported.

In this connection, one of the barriers to proper accountability, transparency and demonstrating the link between priorities and provision on the ground, is the Grant Aided Expenditure funding mechanism which bears little direct relationship to the current true costs of services. This leads to an unclear and uneven distribution of resources supporting core services and a consequent variability in the capacity to address priorities. This is further challenged by the variation in the size and capacity of councils and suggests that it would be helpful to a) re-establish the relationship between GAE and the costs of running education and children's services that meet current expectations of parents and the various levels of Government; and b) develop much more sharing of functions, roles and responsibilities not just across council areas but between regional and national agencies.

ADES believes that this is a good time to review the current arrangements for the leadership, management and governance of the education/children's services system in Scotland with a view to ensuring

- good accountability;
- strong, democratically led long-term strategic planning;
- efficient deployment of resources and functions with more integrated, shared and effective operation at regional and national levels minimising overlap and duplication.

The 'functional' approach referred to above, based on a subsidiarity principle might well show how roles and functions could be better organized especially at/between council/regional and national levels e.g. payroll or very specialised educational services.

Any such potential changes would require an extensive debate and proper engagement of local and national governments, as well as the public and professional organisations.

In response to the COSLA Commission on 'Strengthening Local Democracy', ADES stated that it believes that strengthening local democracy is a laudable aspiration of itself, which is best conducted within the wider context of the arrangements for education and children's services regionally and nationally.

Each council acts as the Education Authority for its area, and there are concerns over how some of its duties should be effectively discharged in the current economic and corporate climate, particularly where the role of chief education/children's services officer is removed or made operational.

Whilst current governance arrangements can facilitate strong local democracy, having 32 local education authorities raises serious questions and challenges for the coherence, capacity, consistency and equity of the system as a whole.

The Scottish Parliament and the COSLA commission should therefore examine whether current arrangements serve local democracy best in terms of efficiency and equity; or whether there is too much variance and inconsistency to guarantee that each child in Scotland has an equally good chance of getting the best education possible regardless of where they live.

The current system has many strengths and wholesale change is not warranted however, in a small nation with a reasonably assured consensus about the role and purpose of education based on egalitarian, democratic and pluralistic principles, it is important to ensure that Scotland is positioned to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow within a planned and agreed system and structure rather than making the best of the structures that were determined in very different times.

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