By Email

Clare Adamson MSP
Convener Education and Skills Committee
The Scottish Parliament

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Dear Clare

Subject Choices Inquiry

Thank you for your letters of 24 and 30 April, requesting additional information and offering the opportunity to comment on the inquiry.

Curriculum for Excellence was designed to enable the education system, and the children and young people within it, to adapt to a rapidly changing world. Our inspection evidence, including the recent National Thematic Inspection of Empowerment for Curriculum Leadership, which we shared with the Committee in advance of our appearance, evidences both progress and the fact that there is still untapped potential in CfE to continue to adapt in meeting young people’s needs. There is still work to do in achieving the full aspirations of CfE for all our young people.

As highlighted during the Committee’s sessions, we are still seeing some schools where the focus is on a one year qualifications ladder, with a drive to the next batch of Nat 4, 5, Higher or Advanced Highers, and too often in the traditional subjects that were studied by those of previous generations but may not always be the best fit now within a 21st century skillset. Young people, preparing for a very different world of work than their parents or teachers, are telling us that there is still too much focus being placed on traditional qualifications at the expense of more innovative pathways through their final years at school, the years which are important preparation for transition into the world of work and future lives.

There is no doubt that we need to help parents, employers and many others to understand these changes and opportunities. As I said during our session, we all have a role collectively in shifting the mind-set of the education system.
Change is already happening for the better and we should acknowledge this. Our Thematic Inspection of Empowerment for Curriculum Leadership revealed that almost all headteachers and schools feel empowered to make decisions about their curriculum. Almost all are now revisiting the broad general education (BGE) to plan better aligned learning pathways between this stage of learning and the senior phase. In secondary schools, we found that teachers are concerned about the number and timing of changes to the SQA’s courses over the past few sessions, which has impacted on planning for progression.

We also found that schools, particularly in rural areas outside the central belt, continue to find it difficult to recruit teachers. Whilst we do see schools taking creative solutions to their position, very successfully, this situation does sometimes limit opportunities to lead extensive curriculum improvements, and in some instances provide a local curriculum which fully meets the needs of children and young people.

The provision of education and therefore the responsibility of employing teachers rests with local authorities. The Scottish Government and COSLA are committed to maintaining teacher numbers as set out in the local government settlement. Local authorities submit data on teacher numbers to the Scottish Government through the annual teacher and pupil census and Education Scotland accesses this data when needed as part of its ongoing work. Education Scotland does not hold data on teacher numbers and their location, or the numbers and location of bi- and tri-level classes. Neither does it have a locus in directing local authorities on the allocation of their core education funding between the schools in their areas. That is the duty of the local authority.

It remains Education Scotland’s position that the number of subject choices taken at S4 needs to be considered in the wider context of the three-year senior phase offer from each school and its partners. We would refer the Committee to the points made by Mr Armstrong during the evidence session regarding how appropriate the offer is to the young people in each school with regard to the full range of subjects, qualifications and awards available. These points have also been made in evidence from members of other witness panels from which the Committee has heard since we attended on 3 April.

Looking only at the average numbers of qualifications on offer to learners over one year in any school is taking account of just one dimension of the learners’ experiences. It misses the critical factor of how relevant the senior phase offer is to the young people and their needs in that school at that time, wherever that school is located. Within the design of a three-year senior phase, we would expect a school to offer the range and levels of qualifications and awards appropriate to the needs of their young people, and that may change from year to year as new groups enter the senior phase. So, in addition to the average number of qualifications on offer you also have to look at how well that offer takes account of the range of learners’ needs in that school and the range of pathways available based on those needs. A school’s own quality assurance arrangements should consider these aspects and of course that would include
the views of learners and their parents. The local authority also has a role in supporting and quality-assuring the provision for learning in their schools.

Support and advice for quality assurance is provided through the quality indicators found in the national quality improvement framework *How Good Is Our School (fourth edition)*. Quality Indicator 2.2 focuses on curriculum and describes very good provision. It highlights the importance of placing the needs of learners at the centre of curriculum design and development, and the need for the structure and delivery of the curriculum to take good account of local and national circumstances. It emphasises that the curriculum is the totality of learning experiences across the four contexts of learning, as delivered by the school and its partners. An effective curriculum results in strong outcomes for all learners.

As part of secondary school inspections, HM Inspectors explore how the school promotes equity of achievements for all children and young people. This includes the extent to which the curriculum provides flexible learning pathways and meets the needs and aspirations of learners. Mr Armstrong referred to the evidence in reports produced by Education Scotland and also to a study being commissioned by the Scottish Government on the senior phase.

During our appearance, we discussed the creative solutions being used by schools to develop their curricula within their local contexts. Consortia arrangements are one such option. Every consortium is unique and, referring to the response that we gave at the time, members of the Committee with concerns may wish to direct specific queries to the relevant local authority which should consider equality issues when setting up its consortia arrangements. It is not Education Scotland’s role to carry an equality impact assessment on a local authority decision.

Bi- and tri-level classes are another option. Education Scotland does not hold data on the numbers and location of bi- and tri-level classes in Scotland. I would refer the Committee to my comments during our appearance that ‘we do not have a substantial body of evidence from our inspection of secondary schools that shows that learning in a bi-level or tri-level class is either a hindrance or a success. We inspect schools and we have a back catalogue of inspections. If such teaching came up repeatedly as a significant issue, we would of course report on that and raise it as an issue with a variety of partners and stakeholders, including policy makers.’

As stated at the Committee, parents want to listen to the voice of the local school. Parental engagement is about the local school. I know that a lot of leadership development work is happening on community links but more needs to be done. In our inspections, we have picked up on the need for some schools across Scotland to work more closely, and at an earlier stage, with parents in particular on curriculum design. We are carrying out a Thematic Review into this area, to be published in June.
We know from working with schools that, where headteachers and staff engage closely with learners, parents and the community in discussing and agreeing the rationale for their senior phase curriculum offer, there is better understanding and appreciation of the advantages of the choices available for pupils’ learner pathways. Schools are best placed to engage with their community, for example to ensure that learners and their parents new to a school’s senior phase offer are supported in understanding all the options and opportunities from S4 to S6.

Headteachers take responsibility for leading their schools and working with partners to develop their curriculum offer, in line with the CfE framework. Expectations for the BGE and for the senior phase are clearly articulated in Building the Curriculum 3. The Committee will be aware of the OECD’s advice in 2015 to revisit the advice set out in the Building the Curriculum documents in order to refresh and remind us all of the narrative and direction of travel. That work is well underway and will be a timely and welcome focal point in the coming session for supporting further curriculum development and innovation.

The recently-published draft Headteachers’ Charter for School Empowerment sets out clearly the role of headteachers, and states: ‘As senior officers of the local authority, responsible for the leadership and management of the service provided to children, young people and their families, headteachers are accountable to both their employer and to their learning community for the leadership and management of education within their setting.’

It advises that in an empowered system, headteachers should lead learning communities to determine the most appropriate approach in key areas. In relation to leading learning and teaching, headteachers are advised to:

- Lead collaborative work to co-design and develop the curriculum and learner pathways, including transitions, which best meet the needs of all children and young people. This should take account of the national framework for Scotland’s curriculum along with the needs of local context, as agreed between schools and the local authority.
- Lead change and improvement, making decisions in partnership with their learning community about the improvement priorities and plan for their school, reflecting and informing the local improvement plan and the National Improvement Framework.

The full version of the Headteachers’ Charter can be found here: https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Documents/HeadteachersCharterFinal.pdf

Education Scotland is looking forward to engaging with thousands of teachers later this year on improvement topics, with innovative curriculum design being a key aspect. Education Scotland’s leadership role includes promoting and supporting collaboration, and seeking and sharing good practice and innovative thinking in curriculum design and in subjects and curriculum areas.

We continue the phased implementation of our re-structuring at Education Scotland, with the current focus on building our regional teams which will work alongside each Regional Improvement Collaborative, local authorities and
schools in supporting improvement in education. Our mission is to work collaboratively with all stakeholders involved in Scottish education to secure sustained improvement in achievement and attainment for all learners, closing the poverty-related attainment gap and securing positive and sustained destinations for all learners regardless of their age and where the learning takes place.

Our Corporate Plan 2019-2022, Strategic Priority 1 demonstrates our commitment to a strong focus on learning, teaching and leadership. Key actions include the following.

- Develop an enhanced professional learning and leadership package to strengthen the capacity for leaders and practitioners to lead and deliver national education priorities, regardless of where the learning takes place.
- Provide practical advice and support to help leaders, practitioners, parents, carers and learners design and develop the curriculum which takes account of the needs of learners at all stages and develops their skills in learning, life and work.
- Support leaders and practitioners to develop their skills in delivering professional learning for others which is focused on the curriculum, leadership for, and of, learning, teaching and assessment within and across curriculum areas, subjects and sectors.

Central to Education Scotland’s professional learning strategy is the new national model of professional learning which provides guidance on what high quality, effective professional learning looks like for education professionals. It identifies the key principles and features of professional learning and offers strategic guidance on how to support, structure and plan professional learning. The model offers a shared language and aspiration, acting as a guide for providers to help inform the nature and purpose of the professional learning offered.

With regard to inspections, HM Inspectors of Education carry out a range of scrutiny activities, including school inspections and national thematic inspections which focus on key priorities. The new enhanced role and remit of Education Scotland, announced in June 2017 as part of the Governance Review - Next Steps included a strengthened inspection function. Part of the delivery of this enhanced remit has been to increase our national thematic inspections. As set out in our annual programme of inspection published in June 2018, HM Inspectors of Education are carrying out four national thematic inspections this academic year, including three national thematic inspections which focus on the following themes related to school empowerment: readiness for empowerment; curriculum leadership; parent and pupil participation. The findings of our national thematic inspection on Empowerment for Curriculum Leadership was published in March 2019.
We have a robust and rigorous recruitment process in place for all staff. Staff who are appointed as HM Inspectors of Education have significant leadership experience in education and a strong understanding of developments across all aspects of Scottish education. Having chosen to further their career by becoming HM Inspectors of Education, they make a positive contribution to improving outcomes for children and young people in schools across Scotland.

Thank you for the opportunity to expand on some of the points made during this inquiry. I will continue to follow it with interest.

Yours sincerely

Gayle Gorman
HM Chief Inspector of Education