

EIS response to Education and Skills Committee call for evidence on “Education Reform – Joint Agreement”

Introduction

The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) welcomes the decision to suspend the introduction of the Education Bill and to seek a more collaborative approach to school governance between local and national government. We would make the point that a more complete approach to partnership working and collaborative practice requires to engage the profession more effectively than is currently the case. The EIS would highlight the critical role of professional associations in this regard, a phenomenon recognised by international research and acknowledged by bodies such as the OECD:

“...the fact is that many of the countries with the strongest student performance also have strong teachers’ unions. Indeed, the higher a country is on the PISA league tables, the more likely it is that that country is working constructively with its teacher organisations and is treating its teachers as trusted professional partners.” Andrea Schleicher, 2018, OECD.

It is disappointing, therefore, that the Education Reform Joint Agreement singularly fails to cite a role for professional associations (except for some reference to the work of the SNCT), although, ironically, it does reference the Teachers’ Panel – a non-representative group all of whom have been selected and appointed by the Cabinet Secretary for Education – as “feeding back the views of the profession on progress towards an empowered system”.

Committee may be assured however, that the EIS will not be silent as this agenda moves forward and is pleased that the Scottish Parliament has called this evidence session to explore the Scottish Government’s proposals for education reform. We would comment as follows.

Empowering Schools

Whilst opposing a legislative approach to governance changes, the EIS is broadly supportive of the principle to empower schools.

The EIS submitted a comprehensive response to the Scottish Government consultation to “Empowering Schools: A Consultation on the Provisions of the Education (Scotland) Bill”, at the beginning of 2018. Committee members who wish to familiarise themselves with our former evidence submissions ahead of our evidence session, will see that the EIS articulated an even greater change than simply empowering Headteachers, advocating for a “democratic schools” model which enabled professional voice, and which is predicated upon collegiate practice, leadership at all levels, collaborative working and transparent accountability.

It remains to be seen if the Joint Agreement between Scottish Government and COSLA will enable this more radical approach to empowering schools.

The fact remains that Scottish education is overly hierarchical in its structures, to the detriment of our system.

As we pointed out in earlier submissions, however, what is required above all else in Scottish education is a change of culture rather than more structural change.

GTCS

Partnership working is a key element of a successful Scottish education model. It is therefore encouraging that the Scottish Government has responded to the concerns raised by the EIS and other key partners on the formation of an Education Workforce Council. Within our response to the Scottish Government consultation the EIS was clear that any dilution of the role and independence of the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) would be a regressive step for Scottish education. We are pleased to note there are no plans to legislate on an Education Workforce Council.

In previous evidence submissions to the Scottish Government the EIS has stated the need to ensure that the GTCS remains independent of Government in order to fully regulate the teaching profession without political interference. A basic principle of any professional body should be practitioner control of the ruling body, self-regulation being a hallmark of professionalism. This is best facilitated by election from the members and must remain of the upmost importance for all future proposals.

Local Authorities

Austerity driven budgeting has led to the underfunding of the Scottish education system over several years. It's clear that in critical areas, such as additional support needs and local pedagogical leadership, previous levels of provision have simply disappeared, inevitably creating barriers for children's learning. It is worth noting that in Finland (widely referenced as an education success story) special support for pupils can be provided to as many as 33% of students. That is simply beyond the capacity of Scottish schools to provide at present. Whilst the EIS looks forward to the publication of guidance by the Fair Funding Reference Group in due course, it must be noted that the capacity of local authorities to support schools has been diminished by the impact of austerity. Irrespective of what governance/funding model emerges, if it is not supported by substantial investment it is likely to founder.

Thankfully, to date, Scotland has not been subject to a fragmentation of education delivery as seen in England. Whilst political tensions can and do exist between Scottish Government and Local Authorities, the agreement to seek greater collaborative working around supporting schools offers a chance to focus on what makes a difference in the classroom, the only real litmus test required as to the efficacy of any proposal.

An early priority for such collaboration should be the removal of the overly bureaucratic governance arrangements presently in our system. The Curriculum for Excellence Working Group on Tackling Bureaucracy reported in 2014 and yet some of its basic recommendations remain to be implemented – despite being signed up to by every agency operating in Scottish education. The level of bureaucracy in Scottish education was created by several partner bodies and has distracted from teaching and learning, thereby hampering the achievement of the goals set out. In this regard, the perceived need for teachers, and schools generally, to be accountable to too many layers of governance could be cited as an impediment to effective teaching and learning - for example, the duplication between Local Authority quality assurance mechanisms and those of HMIE, plus, now, Scottish Government through the NIF.

Headteachers' Charter

The stated ambition of the Headteachers' Charter, to facilitate a greater role for Heads as leaders of learning, is one which no-one would disagree with. Most Heads would describe their current role as being precisely that. The barriers which currently act against this ambition are familiar to all teachers: lack of time, lack of resource; and lack of support.

The EIS does not believe that creating a statutory framework for the role of Headteachers as leaders of learning would address any of these barriers, and we are grateful that at present there are no plans to put this in statute. However, more detail is still needed to ensure that even greater bureaucracy and more managerialist tasks are not placed on Headteachers than is currently the case.

Whilst the EIS recognises the important role of formal leadership posts, and indeed the EIS represents more Headteachers and Deputies than any another organisation in Scotland, we believe that the singular focus from Scottish Government on a HT Charter betrays the opportunity to engage much more in the concept of collegiate and collaborative practice offered by the "democratic schools" approach. Why not a Schools' Charter which encapsulated collegiate practice, distributive leadership and collaborative working?

Scotland's Education system had largely rejected the notion of "heroic-leadership" but the constant singular focus on Headteachers, by Scottish Government, risks endorsing such an approach.

We welcome, however, the commitment from Scottish Government to SNCT involvement in the further exploration of the HT proposal.

Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT)

The EIS believes that the SNCT is a key strength of the Scottish education system and should not be undermined by any changes in governance arrangements.

The tripartite nature of the SNCT (involving the Scottish Government, COSLA and the Teaching Unions) has established a robust negotiating body which has produced national collective agreements on pay and conditions of service which are binding on all parties, since 2001. The establishment, under SNCT, of Local Negotiation Committees for Teachers (LNCTs) has provided effective mechanisms for negotiation and discussion on devolved matters between teacher unions and employers.

It is the EIS position that the SNCT and LNCTs should remain and that any changes to governance should not undermine their effectiveness.

If staffing issues and funding are devolved to school level, the impact on the industrial relations environment would be significant and would not contribute to either excellence or equity. At present these concerns have not been appropriately addressed by Scottish Government.

The EIS remains firm in its support of the existing negotiation structures at both national and local levels.

Pupil and Parental Participation

The EIS has been supportive of pupil voice and participation, particularly as part of a wider focus on democratic school principles. Building pupil confidence and self-esteem can be facilitated by inclusive measures informed by these concepts, as well as aiding more effective decision making. It should be recognised however, that employees have rights, such as a degree of personal confidentiality; these should not be infringed upon by ill-conceived participation of pupils in areas which are essentially operational.

Equally, the EIS believes that greater involvement of parents and carers in the education of their children is to be welcomed and encouraged. This should be much deeper than simply a small group of parents being active in terms of local governance, extending to meaningful school home links which support children's learning. Inevitably, this will require additional investment to support effective practice. Again, the EIS would make the point that teachers, and their representative organisations, should be involved at all stages in the development of this work. Scottish Government, for example, recently launched its "Learning Together" Action Plan with minimal teacher involvement. Parental engagement requires teacher buy-in and support to be delivered successfully. Teachers' need for time, resources, professional learning and support to enhance their approaches to parental engagement will also need to be recognised.

Conclusion

In conclusion it is worth underlining that the EIS is supportive of greater empowerment of the profession and supports the concept of "leading from the middle". We have previously acknowledged the potential of the RICs to fill the pedagogical leadership function which the impact of austerity has diminished significantly, and the "re-boot" of the offer made to schools by Education Scotland is welcome.

However, progress in these areas is contingent on addressing the current recruitment and retention challenge which requires genuine progress to be made on reducing excessive workload and an acceptable agreement being reached on teacher remuneration. Teacher morale is low – starkly indicated by the fact that 58% of our members would not recommend teaching as a career. If the Scottish Government values education, it must show that it values teachers also.