

# International Council of Education Advisers

## Report 2018-20



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## **ICEA REPORT 2018 – 2020**

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# International Council of Education Advisers

## Second Formal Report 2018-2020

### Introduction

The [International Council of Education Advisers \(ICEA\)](#) was established in 2016 to provide advice regarding education policies and practices to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to advance equity and excellence in the Scottish education system. This is the second formal report of the ICEA relating to our second two-year term (2018-2020) of work. We are pleased to bring together our expertise and exercise collective responsibility from our diverse international perspectives in relation to the opportunities and challenges for Scotland's education system. We look forward to continuing to support improvements for Scotland's education system, schools, and students over the next two years also.

The COVID-19 global pandemic has changed the complexion of many issues in education. Our work, like the work of Scottish education, now takes place in a time and circumstances that have turned rules, expectations and basic understandings of what is and should be considered to be normal in education systems upside down. Schools have closed, opened again, and still face uncertainty in the coming months as waves of the pandemic loom in some form or other. Examinations have been cancelled, calculation of results has shifted, and further changes may well be in store. The pandemic has disproportionately affected those who are most vulnerable and living in poverty, placing issues of equity at the very centre of the thoughts of education policymakers. The work of the ICEA is part and parcel of these and other ongoing changes in Scottish education, and it does not and cannot stand apart from them.

Given the circumstances, the unique value of the ICEA right now, irrespective of where the members are currently based, is its international expertise. Members of the ICEA have been providing robust and high-level contributions

to national and global debates and decision-making on COVID-19 and education since the announcement of the global pandemic in March, 2020. The ICEA last had a physical presence in Scotland in February 2020, and longer than that since it was able to visit a school. However, the ICEA continues to want to help strengthen Scottish education and what it can deliver for all young people, especially at this critical time, and has been providing advice to the Scottish government over the period of the pandemic. Also, while the pandemic poses many dangers and challenges, many education systems in the world are also exploring how they could capitalise on the opportunity to make fundamental changes to their school system. As we finalise this report, the roll out of the first phase of vaccinations has begun in the UK, including Scotland. For these reasons, instead of a report that looks back, this second ICEA report looks forward.

The report will make reference to the [previous ICEA report](#), where appropriate. But it acknowledges that any progress on its recommendations must take into account the subsequent disruptions occasioned by COVID-19. So, this report will draw on international knowledge and expertise of ICEA members, including other systems' experiences with education and COVID-19, to interpret a set of specific themes that have longstanding or recent importance for Scottish education, that fall within the expertise of the members of ICEA, and that have become of paramount global importance during the pandemic. These interpretations will be directed to identifying long-term risks and transformational opportunities resulting from what has been learned at this critical time. We would like to support Scottish education not merely to get back to normal, or even to define a new normal, but to use this crisis as an opportunity to become a truly extraordinary educational system in the future.

Scottish educational reforms were making steady progress prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been a significant commitment to developing and strengthening early childhood education. Substantial pupil equity funding has gone directly to schools via the Scottish Attainment Challenge. The teaching profession has moved through periods of disputes with the

government, but has also benefitted from Scotland's increased commitment to the profession, to professional empowerment, and to improving compensation and working conditions. Leadership programmes have been developed for teacher leadership, for middle level leaders, for deputies who want to be heads, and for system leaders. Regional Improvement Collaboratives have built greater collaboration between local authorities and started to benefit from the role of assigned challenge advisors and Education Scotland's regional teams. Many professional networks are emerging to enable sharing of successful examples of what works across schools.

The government, with ICEA's support, is continuing to try to balance and integrate Curriculum for Excellence and the National Improvement Framework, without one being eclipsed by the other. Until the later years of secondary education, assessment continues to rely primarily on teachers' professional judgment and has avoided falling into the trap of excess standardised testing that continues to produce negative side effects in a number of other systems. What has disrupted and also sharpened further thinking is the experience of the pandemic and its impact on Scottish education.

We provide our advice in relation to two priority themes. First, *navigating the pandemic and beyond: redesigning schooling, teaching and learning*, including attention to: integration of digital technologies; expansion of learning outdoors; reform of assessments and examinations; review of curriculum; and engagement of students, families, and communities. Second, *governing and leading education system change and improvement*, including: system leadership, partnerships, and collaboration for a networked learning system; and leading school improvement and continued learning by school leadership and the teaching profession.

## **Navigating the Pandemic and Beyond: Redesigning Schooling, Teaching, and Learning**

*Epidemics of infectious diseases are occurring more often, and spreading faster and further than ever in many different regions of the world. The background factors of this threat are biological, environmental and lifestyle changes, among others. A potentially fatal combination of newly discovered diseases, and the re-emergence of many long-established ones, demands urgent responses in all countries. Planning and preparation for epidemic prevention and control are essential. (World Health Organization, 2018)*

This report begins with a panoramic view of the possibilities beyond this COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has been accompanied by many myths. One of them is that this pandemic is a once-in-a-century occurrence. This not only ignores previous experiences such as Ebola, SARS and swine flu; it is also oblivious to the evidence that the probability of pandemics will increase due to climate change, deforestation, greater proximity of exotic species to human populations, and quantity of international travel.

The risk that future pandemics will occur in our lifetime, perhaps even within a generation, is non-zero and non-trivial. The World Health Organization warned us to be prepared in health terms. We must also be prepared in educational terms.

Our report proposes a profound transformation to Scottish education, indeed to all educational systems, so that they can operate in a pandemic as effectively, or almost as effectively as in other circumstances. It also proposes a universally designed educational system that provides high quality education for all during a pandemic in ways that also improve and transform high quality education for all in other “normal” circumstances.

Universal design is a widely used principle in inclusive education. Originating in architecture, the idea of universal design is that buildings should not be constructed for normal users and then adapted for special populations like the visually impaired or the disabled. Rather, from the outset, a building should be designed so that it can be used and enjoyed by the maximum number and range of users. The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the fact that our educational systems are not universally designed. Whether they are centralised or decentralised, any disturbance of what is considered to be normal requires crisis-driven responses that are typically insufficient and that incur temporary and sometimes lasting harm as a result.

How can an educational system operate for all its learners as effectively during a pandemic, or other crisis, as it can under other circumstances? And how can responding to this challenge improve the accessibility and quality of learning and wellbeing for all young people under all circumstances? These are the issues we address in the rest of our report.

The closure of most schools within the Scottish education system from Friday 20<sup>th</sup> March was executed smoothly and without major challenges. However, during the ensuing five months, the reopening of schools within the context of relatively low levels of transmission, followed by rising levels of transmission of the second wave, the recent falling levels of transmission, and the race to suppress a third wave through vaccination have all presented significant challenges. Alongside many other changes, this is provoking and should provoke a fundamental rethink and an associated reconceptualization of roles, responsibilities and relationships within a system so it will be fit for purpose in a post-COVID world.

### **Integration of Digital Technologies**

When over 1.6 billion children were sent home from school, in over 190 countries, learning or absence of learning moved from school to home environments. In some cases, especially in less developed countries, this meant little or no access to learning at all. In many developed countries,

including ones like Finland, Canada and Scotland, up to a third of children had to be provided with non-digital materials because they had no access to Wi-Fi and/or other devices. In remaining cases, with various degrees of success, systems designed, developed or adapted digital learning options either through online classes, links to materials and websites so families could teach their children, or some blend of online/offline, synchronous/asynchronous options.

The consequences are now well known. Some children benefitted – mostly those in more socio-economically advantaged families; those who had parents with time and availability to help; some of those with attention deficits who could now wiggle and move around when they wanted to; those who were shy and could interact more readily online than in-person; older students who could learn online independently; and students who were no longer being bullied in person by their peers. In most cases, though, there were significant problems with access to Wi-Fi or devices, especially among poorer families; lack of available programmes or platforms; malfunctioning or poor quality programmes; students and teachers with insufficiently developed digital skills; challenges of building relationships and connecting emotionally as well as cognitively online; difficulties for many students who were easily distracted in their learning style or did not have a home environment suitable for learning, and who therefore found it hard to operate as self-directed learners in the digital domain. There was also evidence that students with special education needs, English language learners, and/or students who were already struggling with their learning were negatively affected by remote learning.

Over time, some of the technical glitches got sorted out. Students, parents and carers, and teachers started to improve their digital skills. Some methods of learning are interesting, novel and inspiring. Then eventually, but perhaps not permanently, almost everyone went back to school full-time. In truth, many and perhaps most people breathed a sigh of relief, but we need to be attentive to how we move forward in the current context and beyond. Now is the time for a permanent transformation informed by the following questions:



- What are the best ways to strengthen all students' learning and wellbeing with as well as without digital technology?
- What can we do about the deep digital divide that is amplifying existing inequities in education?
- How can we explore the unique innovative potential of digital technologies inside and outside schools while developing clear strategies to deal with the proven risks for students such as digital addiction and excess screen-time?
- What new opportunities do we now have for reshaping teaching, learning, and assessment to make schools more engaging and innovative for everyone?

Some countries were able to respond swiftly and nimbly to the pandemic because of their prior stance on technology access. PISA's highest performer outside Asia – Estonia - designated internet access to be a human right in 2001, and has all its curriculum available online as a matter of public provision. Uruguay instituted one laptop per child in 2007 and has a national innovation agency that provides curriculum and innovation materials online. It saw a massive uptake in use of its platform within days of moving to learning at home. South Korea already had near-universal access to Wi-Fi and devices before the pandemic hit and one teacher per school was designated to participate in a national network to develop online teaching and learning. Singapore also has a national platform, called the Student Learning Space (SLS). The important point is not just that a national platform exists in some form or other, but also that it is publicly and professionally accessible, has the capacity to be personalised by every teacher for every pupil, and is interactive rather than unidirectional in nature.

The pandemic has accelerated the impact of technology on learning and teaching. In Scotland, for example, the number of users and usage of Glow increased substantially since March, 2020. In the context of the pandemic, the immediate task has been to create digital resources as seen for example in the National e-learning programme, the work of e-Sgoil nationally, and the development of digital resources in the Regional Improvement Collaboratives.

Building on this excellent work, there is now a need to exploit the potential contribution of interactive digital pedagogies for the various purposes of the curriculum. This will require creating an enhanced digital infrastructure that addresses structural and cultural inequities in access to technology within a supportive environment.

Here are some key guidelines for moving forward with system-wide universal design for learning under any and all conditions that incorporates a strong digital component.

1. *The Primacy of Physical Schools.*

Physical schools are inalienable because children's parents need to go to work. They are essential because they enable children and teenagers to gather together to be part of a community and develop senses of identity. Physical schools flatten out extreme inequalities by ensuring that time is not solely devoted to individual achievement but also to providing mutual support and common purpose in a diverse community. Physical schools are also places where certified professionals can know and respond to their diverse students as whole human beings with distinctive talents and needs. Digital learning must be part of the prime physical school environment, not a replacement for it, other than under exceptional circumstances. It is important to consider new possibilities for digitally enriched and enhanced teaching and learning, but Scottish education should not become over-exuberant about hybrid learning, learning without walls, learning becoming ubiquitous, and so on.

2. *Universal Public Access and Provision.*

Access to the internet, and to devices, should be a basic human right. Access to digital learning materials should be universal, public, inclusive, and free. It should be available on a national, interactive, curriculum platform developed with Scottish teachers and funded as well as managed by Scottish Government and Education Scotland. The ICEA commends Scotland for the rapid work on developing digital resources and recommends the further development of a national bank of public resources, where they are not

already in place, to help schools with their *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) requirements and to further develop digitally supported pedagogy and learning.

### 3. *Digital Competence.*

Building on the refresh of CfE there should be intensified focus on digital competence. We consider digital competence to include accessing platforms, understanding interactive functions, managing and not being distracted by chat-based functions, appropriate and inappropriate online behaviour, assessment of the value, legitimacy and accuracy of online materials, capacity for self-assessment and self-monitoring, vigilance about the risks of digital addiction, ability to experience and interpret emotions online, and so on. Digital competence must be taught systematically and explicitly and learned deliberately from an early age. Digital competence and ability to teach online as well as in-person should be a mandatory part of teacher preparation, and something in which all existing teachers should become fully competent within 5 years. At no point, though, should online home-based learning be regarded as a way to replace or erode in-person learning in a physical school environment, unless exceptional circumstances intervene.

### 4. *Self-Directed Learning.*

Effective digital technology use depends a lot on young people's capacity to be responsible, self-directed, and self-regulating learners. Like digital competence, the focus on self-directed learning should be intensified and should not be presumed or simply hoped for. It must be explicitly taught and developed from an early age. This includes self-motivation, time management, ability to screen out distractions, capacity for self-assessment, knowing when and how to seek assistance, self-regulation, and related skills.

### 5. *Risk Management.*

An important feature of all organisations undertaking innovation is identifying, mitigating and eliminating risks to the innovation, the organisation, and those whom the organisation serves. Digital technologies and their implementation incur considerable risks as well as benefits. These include the impact of

excess screen time on young learners, the development of digital addictions, tendencies to encourage short-term tasks and reading habits over longer-term ones, adolescent anxieties arising from online identities and interactions, cyberbullying, discerning misinformation online, displacement of other activities such as outdoor play by digital pursuits, and disruptive processes of technological innovation that can incur learning losses of a year or more among young people who have been affected by them. Responsible innovation with technology must therefore devote time, resources and attention to transparent and reliable risk-management. Reviews of digital risks and opportunities should be regularly incorporated into school and local authority improvement plans, and school inspection frameworks.

#### 6. *Disciplined Innovation.*

Valuable and effective digital technology use should be inquiry-driven, evidence-informed and impact-assessed. Patterns of technology use should be introduced with careful assessment of possibilities, risks, unique value, and relative impact compared to other modalities of learning.

#### **Expansion of Learning Outdoors**

After learning at home, students have returned to school under conditions involving mitigations including sanitation protocols and physical distancing. Physical distancing requirements have raised questions about the impact on children's emotional development, mental health, teacher-pupil relations, and the nature of the school as a community. One response in many countries has been to increase students' time outdoors where risks of transmission are significantly reduced. Being outdoors with others has benefits for wellbeing. Learning outdoors is also something in which Nordic countries, with a similar climate to Scotland, have a long tradition, and that can and should be expanded in all cases, not just during a pandemic.

The capacity to teach one's subject or curriculum in an outdoor environment should become part of all teachers' training and certification. Outdoor learning options should be included in online curriculum guides for potential activities across the curriculum. School designs should be modified and enhanced to

encompass greater possibilities for outdoor learning. These developments would be compatible with Scotland's existing commitments to and strengths in outdoor and adventure learning and in physical and creative play for young children.

The benign paradox is that a universally designed Scottish educational system will be both more digital and more natural. It will also be a more sustainable education system.

### **Reform of Assessments and Examinations**

One of the greatest challenges to education systems during the pandemic has been administering the high school examination system. In Scotland, and elsewhere the examinations that certify young people for higher education and other destinations after school have been causes of great anxiety and disruption for students, families, schools and universities. A major portion of high school certification has assumed the form of a one-time sit-down high school examination. After the temporary accommodations made in 2020 that took the form of replacing exam results with teacher estimations of achievement, we believe the government is right to cancel the National 5, Higher and Advanced High exam diet.

The problems surrounding national examinations arising from the pandemic have exposed underlying issues with established practice. There is a need for a greater role for internal assessment in determining qualifications that better match the knowledge and skills demanded by wider social and economic change. The capacity to apply learning creatively in unfamiliar contexts is increasingly the kind of high-value skill demanded by the workplace of the future. Traditional examinations are not capable of making such assessments on their own. Building from the learning stimulated by the pandemic, a new balance between internal and external forms of assessment is needed. The ICEA commends Scotland for developing teachers' assessment capacities and use of teacher moderation, which are essential professional skills and practices for future assessments.

High school examinations are essentially an out-of-date 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century technology operating in a 21<sup>st</sup> century environment of teaching and learning. Digital technology is transforming our capacities for self-assessment, peer-assessment, shared assessment and continuous assessment. Assessment and examinations can now be more continuous, rather than episodic. They can provide capacities for continuous self-assessment and self-directed progression in learning. They can enable transparent sharing of assessments with pupils, parents and professional colleagues that will lead to timely teacher assistance and intervention. Algorithms can be useful in digital self-assessment processes, though their current capacity to provide valid feedback of complex writing and reasoning skills is sometimes over-claimed. Few of us would want to invest our all in creative writing exercises that had only an algorithm for an audience, for example. Therefore, teachers' professional judgement, use of formative assessments, and teacher moderation are also key aspects of assessment systems.

There may still be components of sit-down examinations, but if these are based on a wide menu of changing, problem-based questions, these can be taken and retaken like driving tests, as needed, throughout the year, rather than in a one-time, high-stress, win/lose moment. At least one state in the US is transferring its budget from standardised testing to formative assessment. California has also now abandoned standard achievement tests as a basis for university selection.

High school examinations have long been seen as poor predictors of future university success. While the selection function of examinations remains important, there is also a need to create approaches that address problems of validity and equity in current arrangements. Hitherto, standards have been defined fairly narrowly in terms of quantitative metrics generating an over-emphasis on those things that can be measured most reliably. This year's examination issues have highlighted the danger of the legitimate needs of reliable metrics overriding the breadth of learning that is increasingly central to success for individuals, societies and economies. Reliability *and* validity both matter. We now also have an opportunity to learn how the somewhat relaxed

entry requirements into university in 2020 will affect future university performance among students who may not have been accepted previously. The ICEA recommends that Scotland reviews and considers these matters for future examination designs and use.

### **Review of Curriculum**

Scotland was one of a small number of countries that introduced a radically different approach to curriculum development in the early years of this century. A lot of the innovative thinking that led to CfE is now reflected in curriculum approaches internationally and has echoes in the OECD's 2030 Project. However, in the fast-changing environment of the 2020s, and especially as we look to a post-pandemic era, it is now time for CfE to be re-evaluated. In the new era ahead of us, Scotland should consider introducing an agreed cycle of curriculum reform that creates necessary flexibility, balances national imperatives with local needs and circumstances, and encourages the kind of broad engagement in thinking that characterised the original national debate that led to CfE. This cyclical review should also address and be informed by the post-pandemic factors identified by this report – positive yet prudent use of digital technologies and platforms, expanded engagement with learning outdoors; more self-directed learning and collaborative inquiry; still more collaborative professionalism and distributed leadership; stronger connections to local community organisations and agenda, including universities; and networked learning systems of horizontal challenge and support across as well as within sectors.

### **Engagement of Students, Families, and Communities**

Students, families, and communities occupy a central place in students' development in the areas of health, wellbeing and academic attainment. In its previous report, the ICEA recognised and commended the Scottish government for implementing policies and practices that moved the system forward in its shared goals of equity and excellence. It noted:

*Within the Scottish Government's policy aspirations is a clear focus on health, wellbeing and employability. These aspects are important in*

*supporting children and young people to develop fully in school and in their post-school destinations, including ensuring each person has a wide range of employment choices, irrespective of background, and the personal capability to self-manage and to be resilient within a rapidly changing world.*

Students, their families and communities are experiencing challenges brought about by COVID-19 in ways that impact their wellbeing, health, and academic progress. Across the world, not just in Scotland, many young people are feeling socially isolated from their peers and experiencing deteriorating mental health - although they also demonstrate resilience and agency by remaining connected through digital and online communication practices such as cell phones and social media. Families already experiencing poverty are now even more concerned about their income streams and job security. Communities that have long been experiencing vulnerability and deprivation are bearing the stigmas of being most affected and infected by COVID-19. As waves of COVID-19 continue, increasing anxiety about the impact for individuals and communities grows.

In these times, the ICEA counsels Scottish education to continue to support students, families, and communities using the guiding principles of CfE. Now more than ever, students, families and communities need to be viewed not just in relation to where they struggle and what they lack, but also from an appreciative perspective of who they are, what they know, and what they are able to contribute.

The Secretary General of the United Nations has forewarned that the global health pandemic could be a “generational catastrophe” for students. While addressing the challenges and many issues arising from COVID-19 for students, it is imperative to do everything possible to prevent such a generational catastrophe and instead to support student voice, agency and development. Scotland must be cautious about labeling an entire generation of students as “Generation COVID” or Generation C, in the way that some analysts have been doing. Such a label exaggerates the challenge and



obscures the agency, resilience, and capacities of young people, their families and communities to support and sustain one another during these difficult times. The ICEA advises Scottish education to continuously inquire about the resources that schools, teachers, learners, families, and communities need and about the strengths they can lend to learning in and beyond this period.

The ICEA recommends that, during and after this pandemic, Scottish education revisits and revives core CFE principles such as confident learners and positive contributors to society (along with support for high quality wellbeing) that are even more important now. How can CfE principles related to wellbeing and confident learners be translated into educational practice? And how do educational practices in school invite the knowledge and resources of families and communities in educating learners while increasing family and community capacities to support young people in increasing their resilience, well being and positive choices?

In *Act Your Age!*, Nancy Lesko provides a sociological account of the paradoxical positions and labels that society ascribes to its young people. On the one hand, youth are viewed as dangers to social safety and progress, incapable of making positive choices for themselves and the social good, and in need of constant surveillance and control by adult authorities. On the other hand, these same young people are looked to as the future of society, and great hope and investments are poured into their social development and educational attainment to protect and advance societies. Underserved and marginalised youth such as those experiencing poverty are often regarded as the greatest threats to society and the least likely to advance its progress. As such these young people, their families, and communities, remain under-resourced; and their knowledge, skills, and contributions are largely ignored.

The ICEA counsels Scottish education to stay the course with its positive views of all young people, irrespective of their backgrounds, and of their abilities to be capable, confident, positive contributors, who are resilient and future-oriented. The ICEA advises Scottish education to combat deficit framings of youth such as those connected to claims about Generation C,

which only exacerbate anxiety, fear, and distrust in and among learners, teachers, families and communities. An asset-based focus on youth, families, and communities is needed now more than ever in Scottish education and society. Furthermore, during the global crisis and emergency responses, including in remote learning and schooling, there has been considerable discussion of what needs to be done for students. Moving forward, students' own voices, experiences, perspectives, and advice must be central to the future of schooling and learning in all its forms.

Parents or carers and family members need also to continue to be regularly engaged in communication with their child's school and educators. During the experience of remote learning and in times of online or hybrid learning, family members have literally seen their child's teaching and learning experiences in new and direct ways. The majority of parents are not trained educators and should not be expected to be. However, the links between home and school are crucial. Parents, carers' and/or other adults caring for children and young people need assistance in understanding current practices in education and navigating the way forward in partnership with schools and educators to support all students to succeed.

The ICEA proposes a bold new approach to developing cultures of innovation and learning within and across neighbourhoods. The vision is to build on the lessons from place-based initiatives like Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland to reimagine the relationships between different phases of education and the communities that they serve.

The pandemic and the development of economic and social initiatives such as *City Deals* and *innovation districts* also provide exciting opportunities for universities to express their civic commitment and to become anchor organisations for a learning network. These initiatives can connect universities with their local communities to create cultures that promote innovation and learning for all.

One way to achieve this is by forming Research Practice Partnerships that stimulate new ways of working for education and other services within the local area, especially in high poverty contexts, to promote inclusive growth, wellbeing, widened access, and enhanced educational outcomes for all those within the community. These partnerships would:

- Take an holistic, place-based perspective;
- Have a commitment to cradle to career and life-long education;
- Be a multi-agency hub;
- Be a site for all through (early years to post-secondary education) education;
- Be a hub for world leading curriculum and pedagogical research, development, experimentation and innovation in urban education; and
- Be a centre of excellence for teacher preparation and professional learning.

In summary, navigating through the current COVID-19 pandemic and beyond involves reconsidering the design of schooling, teaching and learning, including attention to: integration of digital technologies; expansion of learning outdoors; reform of assessments and examinations; review of curriculum; and engagement of students, families, and communities. In order to do so, further development of leadership, partnership and collaboration throughout the education system, and with other relevant sectors and partners, is required. We turn now to our advice concerning leadership and the education profession.

## **Governing and Leading Education System Change and Improvement**

The pandemic has become a test for national health care, political leadership, and education systems of their ability to navigate through external shocks and catastrophe. Those nations that had strong public health care and education systems working in concert with one another, and credible as well as

collaborative political and professional leadership to encourage everyone to do their best to keep their communities safe, have been able to manage the crisis with less harm to their children, citizens and economies. Reports from around the world indicate that, within Western cultures at least, self-organizing communities keep people safe in the age of coronavirus pandemic fare better than those that act to conform or just comply with external orders. Valuing and developing leadership, partnership, and collaboration throughout the education system is paramount.

### **System Leadership, Partnership and Collaboration for a Networked Learning System**

There may be a silver lining in the COVID-19 crisis in terms of a chance to rearrange and reset schools, reimagine learning, and rethink education on more inclusive, responsive, agile, and collaborative lines in ways that would entail bold and brave shifts in policy and leadership mindsets.

The challenge of central government is to balance necessary consistency of purpose with local energy, innovation and ownership. The roles of national and local government and of intermediate agencies need to be clearly understood with an emphasis on inclusiveness, responsiveness, agility, and collaboration within a framework of common purpose. The principle of subsidiarity whereby local agency is valued and protected should be part of such a longer-term approach to governance.

Within a framework of national expectations and support, many local authorities and schools have indeed shown flexibility and speed of response during the pandemic. At the same time, however, the need for fast action has also relied upon and reinforced some existing hierarchies. This may have the effect of ‘tightening’ the system back up and weakening the horizontal networks that have developed under various initiatives, including the development of Regional Improvement Collaboratives.

The flexibility and speed of response shown by services during the pandemic suggests that there is an opportunity to move beyond some of the more

bureaucratic and inflexible pre-pandemic practices. In terms of system change and system leadership, this would require:

- a shift from one-size-for-all prescriptions for teaching and learning to flexible, diverse, creative and self-directed approaches;
- a transition from conformity and compliance as schools' theories of action to creativity, flexibility, horizontal challenge and support, and resiliency;
- a move from traditional divisions between education and health, sport and social care, to school as a central place for the education, health and wellbeing of each and every child.

Our 2018 report presented a framework for analysing the features of four contrasting cultures and associated types of public service organisations (Figure 1).

	Low social cohesion	High social cohesion
High social regulation	<p><b>'Fatalistic culture'</b> <i>'uncertain nostalgic organisations'</i> <b>B</b></p>	<p><b>'Hierarchical culture'</b> <i>'bureaucratic, managed organisations'</i> <b>A</b></p>
Low social regulation	<p><b>'Individualistic culture'</b> <i>'market-based state-funded organisations'</i> <b>C</b></p>	<p><b>'Egalitarian culture'</b> <i>'mutualistic self-improving organisations'</i> <b>D</b></p>

*Figure 1: Socio-cultural perspectives on education reform*

The report interpreted the findings of the 2015 OECD review and the Scottish Government's response, as a positive attempt to shift the system towards quadrant D, an egalitarian culture associated with a self-improving system. It suggested that, 'high levels of social cohesion would be manifested through

partnership, collaboration, and co-production between service providers (and the communities they serve), and low levels of social regulation would promote higher levels of flexibility, agility and innovation.’ It also suggested that ‘...systematically built trust in what teachers and schools do... is an essential part of the journey towards a networked and self-improving education system in Scotland’.

In light of the pandemic, ICEA now recommends that Scotland should move still further beyond what has become known as a *self-improving system* – a term that is perhaps overly rooted in the idea of creating coherence and improvement in more fragmented and market-competitive educational systems - to become a *Networked Learning System (NLS)*. An NLS is:

- connected through networks across physical, professional and virtual boundaries; and
- driven by design-based research and collaborative inquiry to innovate, test and refine practice and build leadership capacity through practice-based professional learning.

The purpose of NLS is to support the development of more equitable education systems that improve outcomes for all learners. In NLS, educators are collaboratively inquiring professionals who are empowered to lead improvement in their own and others’ professional settings. Equally, young people are self-directed and collaboratively inquiring learners who are empowered to lead their own and each other’s learning. Increased professional agency and constantly improving professional judgment are based on subsidiarity, professional learning, collaborative inquiry, and horizontal accountability. In other words, NLSs are systems that adapt and improve continuously in conditions where everyone’s expertise and learning is valued and drives improvement.

Drawing on these principles of an NLS, we recommend that the Scottish education system should focus on building *collective agency and efficacy*,

*mutual challenge* and continued shift in the *ownership of change and responsibility* for making judgments about change towards people who are closest to the practice. This is the essential principle of subsidiarity:

- *Collective agency and efficacy* is where people believe they can make a difference to all young people's learning and wellbeing. Collective agency and efficacy within and across networks is a key ingredient for building an inclusive, responsive, agile and collaborative system that can continually adapt and improve while advancing its core values and purposes.
- *Mutual, horizontal challenge* is a feature of a mature educational system that is comfortable in its own skin and that has the confidence and capability to question and challenge assumptions about effective ways of working and about practice at all levels. There should be less emphasis on meeting externally set expectations and more on the horizontal challenge of pursuing high-quality education for all young people. Challenge is a dynamic force within a system; not simply external pressure on that system. Scotland has avoided many of the negative high-stakes effects of excessive and inappropriate forms of top-down challenge that characterize a number of other systems. But the need for greater dynamism and challenge within the Scottish system remains. Many recent initiatives in Scotland such as the appointment of Challenge Advisors to support, stretch and strengthen Regional Improvement Collaboratives have the potential to realise this necessary dynamism, but they may require still further strengthening.
- *Shifting the ownership of change* closer to the learning and wellbeing of young people will allow policy to be co-created. Teachers are important policymakers who make important judgments and decisions that affect the educational experiences and futures of children and adolescents.

COVID-19 has changed the context of the Scottish education system. This report offers a vision of what an NLS might look like in practice in this changed landscape.

A lesson from this crisis is the need to rely less on policy-driven education reforms, and more on practical and powerful ideas with track records of proven success across sectors to improve learning, wellbeing and health in different educational settings. Collaboration, not just coordination between education and health, and networked improvement of children's lives (through learning and health) will be more successful than the imposition of independently mandated reforms by authorities in different sectors. In short, the respective roles of national and local government and of intermediate agencies need to be reviewed after the pandemic to ensure they enhance inclusion, responsiveness, agility and collaboration in an effective post-pandemic system that benefits all young people in Scotland. This is not just a statement of philosophy, or a plea for additional resources and initiatives. It calls for a shift in resource allocation from central government and agencies to regional and community-based authorities.

### **Leading School Improvement and Continued Professional Learning**

The ICEA recognises there are many education workers involved in Scotland's education system. All education workers have been directly impacted by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for changes within schools and shifts in approaches to leading, teaching, learning, equity and well-being. Education workers have been on the front-line of leading the way through the pandemic for students. International evidence is clear that combinations of remote learning, online learning, hybrid learning, in-person learning, and the health and safety protocols and procedures associated with COVID-19 have resulted in increased workload, work intensification, and challenges of work-life balance for educators and support staff. While the main focus has been on students' well-being; the adults who work in schools and education's own well-being has been impacted too. We discuss factors relating to school leadership and the teaching profession below.



## **School Leadership**

Leadership is a fundamental driver of education reform within Scotland, as in most education systems. The previous ICEA report underlined its importance:

*The ICEA believes that a policy focus on leadership, pedagogy, and collaboration are significant strengths within the current education policy framework. If there is also more emphasis placed on capacity building, the focus on leadership, pedagogy and collaboration should lead to real improvements at school and system level.*

The ICEA has consistently underlined how a focus on cultural change, capacity building, and structural change were key elements in securing sustained improvements in Scotland's education system. Developing effective leadership and a robust culture of collaborative professionalism are critical components of such an approach. The previous report noted that capacity building measures were clearly moving in the right direction. It also suggested that Scottish Government needed to consider how its education system would ensure that the right leaders were in the right places in the right numbers at the right time.

Since our previous report, COVID-19 has disrupted the routine practices of schools, colleges, and universities. Leadership has pivotally changed - potentially, forever. Leaders have had to adjust very quickly to the practical, pedagogical, and financial implications of the pandemic, often without clear guidance or direction, as the pace has been too fast, the multiple changes required have been too great, and the pressure has been relentless.

Educational leaders in Scotland (and elsewhere) struggled to adhere to their core principles, values and practices, and sometimes, just simply to keep going. The emotional, mental, and physical toll upon school (and other) leaders is very real, almost unimaginable, and utterly unsustainable (as it is for other educators too). Presently, school leaders are barely holding the front line of the system together, as each day brings new challenges, stresses, and

heartbreak, as families in the poorest communities are battered by the storm of COVID-19.

COVID-19 is waging a war on all of society. This is particularly true in the most disadvantaged communities of Scotland. The pandemic reinforces the issue of equity as the defining agenda of our time. Leaders in schools serving the most disadvantaged and most vulnerable populations are putting themselves, their resources, their staff and their own emotional well-being on the line, every day. Inevitably, there will eventually be a breaking point. Continuing to routinely deliver high quality blended and on-line learning amidst unpredictable absences among children, young people and staff, is a nightmare scenario that will overwhelm these school leaders in the long term without proper intervention.

The Scottish Government has produced a wealth of helpful and informative guidance during this COVID-19 period, but at the sharp end of educational leadership, far more can still be done. In an inclusive, responsive, agile and collaborative pandemic-proof system, the over reliance on one leader, and one senior leadership team, must shift. There needs to be more incentives and clear policy statements about the value of sharing and distributing leadership responsibilities. This means bringing in more leaders (middle leaders, curriculum leaders etc.) to help shoulder some of the responsibilities and duties that accompany the many additional COVID-19 tasks and procedures, including the demands of track and trace. It also means more networking and more collaboration among schools.

There must be a clear policy imperative to focus on the mental and emotional health of leaders throughout the Scottish education system. Caring for leaders' wellbeing and mental health, especially if the pandemic persists, is essential if the education system is to keep functioning. If leaders are unwell, eventually all those they support will suffer too.

All school leaders (and system leaders) should have a mentor, someone to talk to in confidence, and access to mental health support, when needed. In

addition, horizontal support needs to be provided, possibly with heads or senior leadership teams working together within their local authorities, as well as through regional collaboratives, and networks, to reduce the isolation and offset some of the individual pressures leaders are experiencing. This should not be left to chance.

A significant re-deployment of resources at a national and a local level is needed to support all leaders. Providing mentors and developing horizontal networks of support are two of these key ways to protect and support leaders through and beyond the pandemic. The offer made by Education Scotland in November 2020 to provide mentoring for leaders who feel they need it, is therefore to be welcomed as a positive first step towards making this provision a universal and universally designed entitlement beyond the pandemic.

A further consideration is to reduce the external burdens on school leaders so they can focus on the core and critical work of enabling learners to be well and to progress. Many aspects of previous 'business as usual', should be paused, so educational leaders can find space with their colleagues to continue functioning on a day-to-day basis.

Much of the leadership development menu of the past applies to a world that no longer exists. Scottish government should therefore redeploy resources towards supporting and developing existing and future school leaders, through and then beyond the current pandemic, in an inclusive, responsive, agile and collaborative NLS of continuous adaptation and improvement.

### **The Teaching Profession**

Scottish Government has had a strong focus on improving the professionalism and wellbeing of teachers. This has led to a much greater emphasis on professional learning as an ongoing feature of professional growth rather than on training for specific purposes. It has also encouraged greater involvement of universities in primary and secondary education with support for teachers to take Masters level qualifications; and it has recognised

the need for novice teachers to be supported for the first few years in their positions.

Like society in general, the teaching profession has gone through periods of rapid change, expanding goals, and ever-increasing demands and expectations. There is sometimes the tendency to under-appreciate the rich knowledge and research base that the profession has acquired over the years and the important role it plays in educating the next generation. The need to redouble all efforts to assist the profession that replicates Scotland's democracy and serves as the gateway to a broader range of opportunities for an increasingly diverse student population is of paramount importance.

Teachers play a vital role in society's civility, success and prosperity. They influence the life chances and choices of young people and help them develop higher expectations for learning and attainment. It is not unusual for some teachers to describe the sense of exhilaration that they experience when they have a rewarding day of teaching, counselling or discussing future career options with their students and their parents. The education system needs to continue its emphasis on the professional learning experiences that teachers identify as a need to fulfil their mandate to close achievement gaps and address issues of health, wellbeing and teaching-related concerns.

However, as discussed for school leaders above, the demands on teachers have increased and expanded over the period of the pandemic. Teachers urgently need support with their own well-being, including physical and mental health that has been affected during the pandemic, and with having appropriate and safe working conditions. Issues of workload and work intensification continue to need to be addressed. We can do more to help teachers reaffirm their values, reclaim their sense of mission, redouble their efforts, and sustain their enthusiasm.

To do all this, the teaching profession must continue to be positioned as a highly trusted, respectable profession in the society. The recommendations in *Teaching Scotland's Future* that were accepted by the government now need

to be revisited in the current context. In particular, it will be important to define teacher productivity more broadly so that professional learning and investment in collaborative professionalism, and in new competencies such as digitally enhanced pedagogy and teaching outdoors, to serve diverse and changing needs, are embodied in teachers' terms and conditions. Building on existing work to support students' wellbeing, further professional learning and resources to support wellbeing are even more important now.

This focus on capacity building at all levels within the teaching profession must continue to be the core of the Scottish improvement agenda and its desire to secure an enduring impact on the country's future prosperity. This is central to Scotland's resolve and determination to be a world-class education system committed to improvements in educational equity and excellence, and for student and staff well-being.

Navigating through the pandemic and designing the future of school improvement to support each and every student to develop and succeed will require continued development of capacity, leadership, collaboration, and professional judgement and expertise throughout the system. Valuing, respecting and supporting everyone who is involved is essential.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In summary, the ICEA feels that Scottish education exhibits many strengths. It values equity as well as excellence. It has an excellent standing internationally. It is investing effort and resources to narrow attainment gaps, working with and strengthening the teaching profession, and developing collegial Regional Improvement Collaboratives.

COVID-19 is both a disruption and an opportunity. In moving towards a post-pandemic Scottish Education, the ICEA recommends:

- an education system that is universally designed and pandemic-proof;

- a commitment to system change that is driven by collaborative professional relationships and underpinned by peer challenge rather than external demands;
- superior digital pedagogies and universally accessible, high quality, and interactive national learning platforms;
- cyclical reviews of Curriculum for Excellence and the realisation of its core capacities;
- deliberate development of increased student capacity for self-directed learning;
- a shift towards continuous professional assessment supported by investment in appropriate professional learning;
- an asset-based view of students, families and communities that avoids stereotypes like Generation C, and refrains from scapegoating marginalized youth;
- a theory of change and leadership approaches that emphasise distributed responsibility and engagement, professional judgment and agency, robust collaborative professionalism, and local energy and ownership;
- integrated learning, health and wellbeing within a place-based holistic educational approach;
- a Networked Learning System to enhance connections among schools and professionals, designed-based research and practice-based professional learning;
- support for leaders in their work and wellbeing through mentoring as a professional entitlement;
- a teaching profession with certification, terms, conditions, support, and professional learning that enhance digital competence, capabilities concerning teaching outside, and strengthened collaborative professionalism.

Even as Scotland works through the immediate changes brought about as a response to the pandemic, it should keep an eye on the future. With thoughtful planning and management, the destructive effects of COVID-19

may be converted to positive developments within Scottish education in the longer term. Building on its foundational belief in equity and excellence, there is every chance that Scottish education can be a global standard bearer of education in a post-pandemic world.

### **From Abnormal to Extraordinary**

This is not a time for getting back to normal. It is not even time to develop a modified new normal. It is time to look to the future to redesign Scottish education as a universally designed system for all contingencies and disruptions. This system can and should develop self-directed learners; provide access to digitally-based learning as a human right; transform assessment to be continuous, inclusive and responsive; and ensure that all students and teachers are equipped with online and outdoor capabilities that will be pandemic-proof in the future and significantly better in the present. All of this can and should occur within a universally designed system that becomes increasingly inclusive, responsive, agile and collaborative, with changes in government resource allocations that reflect this shift.

The future will not be about blended or hybrid learning, just as a mix of whole class teaching with group-based learning is not blended or hybrid either. The point is simply to ensure that post-pandemic changes are as routine a part of everyone's learning and teaching environment, and as much an ingrained part of their own expertise as any other aspect of teaching and learning. It is time to move from this and next years' *abnormal* interruption to young people's learning, to an *extra-ordinary* future for all their education. Everyone involved in Scotland's education system has an important role to play in leading future improvements for Scotland's schools and students.

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