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Taking Scotland Forward – the role of Education

Deputy First Minister - John Swinney
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There can be no greater responsibility than to ensure each and every child and young person has a fair chance to succeed in our country. Fulfilling that responsibility will drive every moment of my term in office as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. Bluntly, we must 'get it right for every child'.

We have great schools and great teachers right across Scotland. As Education Secretary, I will support the development of education in Scotland – publicly controlled and operating for the good of everyone in our country.

But for too many children in Scotland, the ability to succeed in life is determined by where you live rather than how hard you work. This Government is determined to bring that tragedy to an end.

Priorities

I will be focused on delivering three key priorities - each of them essential to ensure the potential of every young person in Scotland is fulfilled.

Firstly, to ensure that our children and young people get the best start in life, I will focus on transforming early learning and child care with a doubling of provision, the deployment of flexibility to help parents, particularly mothers, return to work and an insistence on educational input to close the attainment gap before it begins to emerge.

Secondly, by empowering teachers, parents and communities, by reducing workload, by ensuring funding reaches schools to meet local needs, by focusing on what works and by being relentless in our efforts to raise standards for all children, I will work to close the attainment gap for good.

Thirdly, by widening opportunities to higher, further and vocational education I will ensure that every child has the same chance to progress. I will do everything in my power to break down the barriers which prevent young people from deprived backgrounds progressing to the same levels as their more affluent peers.

Achieving excellence and Equity

Presiding Officer, closing the attainment gap and improving attainment across education in Scotland - in other words the pursuit of equity and excellence - will be the driving purpose of my tenure as Education Secretary. I believe that aspiration is widely shared across this Parliament and across this country.

My challenge is to bring the numerous and varied voices involved in this debate together to ensure the pursuit of excellence and equity is translated into concrete actions that transform the life chances of young people in Scotland.

That is why the Summit on Education announced yesterday by the First Minister is essential. It will focus on the actions we need to take collectively to realise our ambition of closing the attainment gap and raising standards for all children in Scotland. It will inform the Delivery Plan I intend to publish before the summer recess, a Delivery Plan anchored in the National Improvement Framework published in January, that will develop and set clear, precise and meaningful milestones on the road to closing the attainment gap.

The Summit on Education is part of my commitment to listen, to listen to the views and concerns that affect the performance of the education system.

One of the significant concerns I have heard is about teacher workload as a consequence of change within the education system. I am going to act today to reduce that workload as my first step to improving the performance of Scotland's schools.

I am publishing the first report of the Assessment and National Qualifications Group and implementing its recommended actions in full. These commit the Scottish Qualifications Authority to reduce teacher workloads in 2016-17 by streamlining their requirements for unit assessment, and by simplifying verification for 2016-17. The SQA has published subject reviews that will further reduce teacher workload next year and beyond, and is also publishing its evaluation reports today.

I have met the Chief Examiner for Scotland to press her to further reduce the burden of assessment and examination. She has advised me that the changes I am announcing today go as far as they can at this stage. To go further would reduce the value, and damage the integrity of, our national qualifications that could create risks to their secure delivery. I cannot jeopardise the ability of young people to obtain the qualifications to which they are entitled.

I will ensure that the SQA continues to take all the actions it can to achieve reductions in workload and will meet with the Chief Examiner on a monthly basis to ensure progress promised is progress delivered.

I have also met with the Chief Inspector of Education and insisted that Education Scotland sets out clear national expectations around qualifications and assessment that will further reduce unnecessary workload for teachers and provide clarity where it is required on the curriculum. The Chief Inspector is writing to all schools with that statement today.

statement today.

I hope there will be a recognition that within my first week in office I have acted decisively to address issues in front of me to reduce teacher workload and strengthen Scottish education.

Rising to the challenge set by the First Minister - to make significant progress in closing the attainment gap within the lifetime of this parliament and to substantially eliminate it within a decade - falls on all of our shoulders. This will not be an easy challenge but it is one to which I am absolutely dedicated. I hope that we can all be united in our efforts to deliver on this ambition - to build excellence and equity in Scottish education. We owe that to every child and young person in Scotland.

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