

Children in Scotland

every child - every childhood

Response to the 'Call for Evidence on the Future of School Management in Scotland' by the Scottish Parliament's Education Committee

July 2010

Children in Scotland thanks the Scottish Parliament's Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee for its invitation to submit evidence on the future of school management in Scotland.

We think there is the potential for this initial exploration by the Committee to lead to a productive policy debate and major improvements in practice. We agree with the Committee's future focus, rather than one on short-term fixes. This brief document signals our perspective on a cross-section of key issues to which we could contribute more extensively at subsequent stages of the Committee's investigation.

Overview

Our three over-riding points are:

First, it would be valuable for any subsequent inquiry, research or action by the Committee to encompass the *organisation, governance and management of lifelong learning (pre-birth through adulthood)*. Limiting the scope solely to formal P1-S6 school management would miss a variety of very important opportunities.

Second, Children in Scotland supports the direction of travel in Scotland toward: a) *deeper integration* of universal policies, services and supports for children and their families (with well-integrated extra help for those needing it); and b) *better collaboration* among public bodies, voluntary sector groups, communities and service users (including parents/carers and children and young people). Any consideration of the future of school (or lifelong learning) management should ensure that it furthers this direction of travel, rather than being isolated from it.

Third, the most fundamental outcome (and thus, the constant focal point) should be on *significantly improving the current well-being and future life chances of children, young people and their families throughout Scotland*. History both within and outwith Scotland has shown that debates on this topic can become so entangled in theoretical, structural, financial and procedural matters that what actually happens to the intended beneficiaries (i.e. children and young people) becomes marginalised by competing adult interests.

The evidence from history (within and beyond Scotland) is that good management is necessary, but not sufficient, to ensure the high quality education and care that all children need and deserve. Beyond management and governance issues, the crucial determinants of child well-being and successful learning continue to be: their overall health; the quality and circumstances of their family and community life; the effects (positive or negative) of their early years experiences; the quality of the children's sector workforce; and, the robust implementation of the laws, policies and practices intended to help them.

Specific issues and evidence

Children in Scotland is aware of, and involved in, a variety of activities that have a direct bearing upon the issues the Committee is considering. Brief information is provided below and in the attached documents. Further evidence is also available.

Alternatives to local authority governance/management

In Scotland, local authorities run all government-funded schools. Thus, the experience with models of 'public funding, but non-government management' of primary and secondary schools has taken place beyond Scotland's borders. These examples are instructive and illustrative of potential strengths and weaknesses. However, very careful consideration about if/how they could be successfully adapted within the Scottish context is not a simple matter.

Such models have been trialled in the USA for more than two decades. In 1992, legislation was passed in Sweden that permitted schools to be operated by private or charitable bodies (see attached article from July 2010 issue of *Children in Scotland* magazine).

Both countries use a 'voucher' system for education, which entitled parents to have their child educated in the state system or in a school of their choice run by another organisation. In this way, its operation is similar to that of pre-school education in Scotland. In both countries, these arrangements have now been in place long enough to give indications of their impacts.

Evidence from the USA about the success of so-called 'charter schools' (and voucher programmes) does not make us sanguine about the merits of repeating this experiment in Scotland – at least without major modifications. For instance, claims that these changes will lead to better pupil performance are less than convincing. Studies by Hoxby in 2000, and repeated in 2004, showed some evidence that pupils from certain backgrounds (not the most disadvantaged) did better educationally in charter schools than in public schools. The research, however, was conducted only in Chicago. Thus, it cannot be assumed to be representative of other states or the nation as a whole (let alone a guide to what is likely to happen in Scotland).

The most authoritative study, conducted in 2009 by Stanford University, provided a detailed national assessment of performance. The findings were that only 17% of charter schools were achieving academic significantly better than the government school system. Of the remainder, 46% showed no difference and 37% were significantly worse. Of particular note is a new book by the eminent American education historian (and former US Assistant Secretary of Education) Professor Diane Ravitch. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Undermine Education* (2010) is especially important because it is an evidence-based reflection upon – and retraction of – her previous championing of the types of school management 'reforms' now under increasing consideration in the UK.

The Swedish 'free school' model is often quoted as a successful alternative to state-run education. There does appear, on the face of it, to be evidence that the existence of 'free schools' has impacted positively on overall academic attainment; including pupils in municipal schools. The claim is made that attainment is generally higher in the 'free schools' than in the public system.

There are, however, a number of qualifications to this assertion that need to be understood. Because of the geographic distribution and the varying levels of funding that municipalities make available to 'free schools', it is not possible to make reliable comparisons at national level. There are also no nationally aggregated attainment data gathered routinely in Sweden, as is the case in Scotland (nor are there standardised grades across all municipalities). At best, the impact of the 'free schools' can be seen as moderately positive in municipalities.

The most comprehensive and recent research (Bohlmark and Lindahl, 2007 & 2008) indicates that the children who benefit most are from highly educated families. This might parallel the differences between government and private schools in Scotland, where socio-economic background explains achievement/attainment differences at least as powerfully as school management or educational content.

The attached *Children in Scotland* magazine article draws attention to a new Swedish Education Act (expected to be announced shortly) that will be address concerns in Sweden over social segregation. An additional issue that has emerged in Sweden is that, just like any other private enterprise, these private schools can be sold at a profit. As the article notes, this differs from other similar provisions in some other Nordic countries (e.g. Norway) and has attracted considerable criticism as some schools are now being sold off at a considerable profit.

Cluster schools and community involvement in decision-making

Although Swedish 'free schools' have attracted a lot of attention, more can be learned from the developments Sweden has made to the education system in other ways, e.g. linking schools with the pre-school system. Sweden has also developed a "whole day" approach that incorporates school-age childcare and additional graduate-qualified 'pedagogue' staff working alongside teachers to help 'get it right for every child'. The Swedish changes reflect wider international – as well as Scottish – trends toward vertical and horizontal linkages.

In Scotland, at least one local authority is considering a 'trust' arrangement for its schools, involving a significant degree of community governance. The intention would be to build on existing clusters -- consisting of a secondary school and its associated primary schools -- coming together to plan and deliver educational provision for children from 0 – 18 in the locality, with parent and community governance. There are of course positive benefits which may accrue from this model. A 'vertically integrated' plan for children's education, coherent from early childhood through to the end of secondary school, has great potential to bring about improved educational outcomes.

Portugal has, since the early 1990s, operated a model of schools management that has much in common with this approach. The attached article by Luis Ribeiro is from the latest issue of *Children in Europe* magazine (of which *Children in Scotland* is the English-language publisher). The Portuguese experience does appear to support the positive educational impact of such a model. The Portel cluster, for example, raised attainment by 20% over 2 years by integrating planning and delivery of education across ages and stages.

Meaningful community involvement in school management – and even more in lifelong learning – has the potential to convey many advantages. This may have particular relevance to small schools in rural areas of Scotland, where the school often is the heart of the community – and where it could more become the practical hub of the community in terms of integrated services and support for children and their families. However, its potential benefits are limited to remote rural communities or small schools.

Bringing parents/carers and communities more effectively into the lifelong learning process and the promotion of child well-being are not new ideas in Scotland. This is evidenced by the interest in learning communities and New Community schools; such legislation as For Scotland's Children and the Scottish School Parental Involvement Act; and such national policies as the Early Years Framework, Getting it right for every child, Equally Well and, of course, the Curriculum for Excellence.

The crucial issue has been, and continues to be, *implementation*. The interest in, and policy support for, for sharing responsibility (and accountability) among public bodies, voluntary sector groups, parents/carers and the local community must be far more robustly carried out in practice for the benefits to be realised. Community planning needs to become more broadly representative and effective. And, practical ways still need to be found (or where successful, be replicated/adapted more widely) so that lifelong learning and enhanced well-being are genuinely everybody's business.

Safeguards must be put in place in any community governance proposal, to ensure that all parents and community members are equally valued in school governance -- and that training, encouragement and support are given to those parents/carers and community members who are less likely to put themselves forward. School governance and management should never be allowed – even unintentionally – to become the vehicle for increasing inequalities within schools and communities. Schools must become better agents of social justice.

Workforce matters

It is not sensible to pursue reforms about school management/governance (or lifelong learning) without serious consideration of the nature, requirements for and needs of the workforce that will be expected to deliver the services and support in this arena. Children in Scotland has developed a good deal of knowledge and information about Scotland's children's workforce (broadly defined) past, present and future. Our 'Working it out' programme funded by the Scottish Government offers relevant research, case studies and advice that the Committee may find helpful
<http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/workforce/index.htm>

In addition, our 'Working for inclusion' programme funded by the European Commission offer valuable lessons from other European nations on this topic: <http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/wfi/index.htm>

Remembering the students

Most important, Children in Scotland believes that *any change to school management/governance must be of demonstrable, significant benefit to all children*, including those requiring additional support for learning. Structures should support the best possible outcomes for all, not just help those already doing well to do better. Any change that diminishes the capacity to 'get it right for every child' should be resisted. Doing this well must also include a much more robust commitment to, and implementation of, *direct pupil involvement in school management and decision-making*. Enshrined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the point that children and young people have the right to be heard and heeded in decisions that affect their lives to the extent their capability and maturity permit.

This principle is reflected in the Standards for Scotland's Schools Act 2000, as well as in the new Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010. And yet, it remains a weak point within the operation of most Scottish schools today. Our recent three-year research project with the University of Edinburgh – Having a Say at School <http://www.havingasayatschool.org.uk> – is the largest study ever undertaken about pupil councils throughout Scotland (including primary, secondary, independent and special schools). Its findings reveal that while approximately 90% of Scottish schools have a pupil council, only a small percentage of these 'laboratories of democracy' have any meaningful say in the governance, management or operation of their own school. This is an area in which a great deal of developmental work remains to be done.

For further information, please contact:

Marion Macleod
Senior Policy and Parliamentary Officer
mmacleod@childreninscotland.org.uk
0131 222 2435

Children in Scotland is Scotland's national agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children, young people and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that policies and services and other provisions are of the highest possible quality and are able to meet the needs of a diverse society. Children in Scotland represents more than 400 members, including 90% of Scottish Local Authorities, all major voluntary, statutory and private children's agencies, professional organisations, as well as many other smaller community groups and children's services. It is linked with similar agencies in other parts of the UK and Europe.

The work of Children in Scotland encompasses extensive information, policy, research and practice development programmes. The agency works closely with MSPs, the Scottish Government, local authorities and practitioners. It also services groups such as the Cross Party Parliamentary Group on Children and Young People (with YouthLink Scotland). In addition, Children in Scotland hosts Enquire - the national advice service for additional support for learning, and Resolve: ASL, Scotland's largest independent education mediation service.