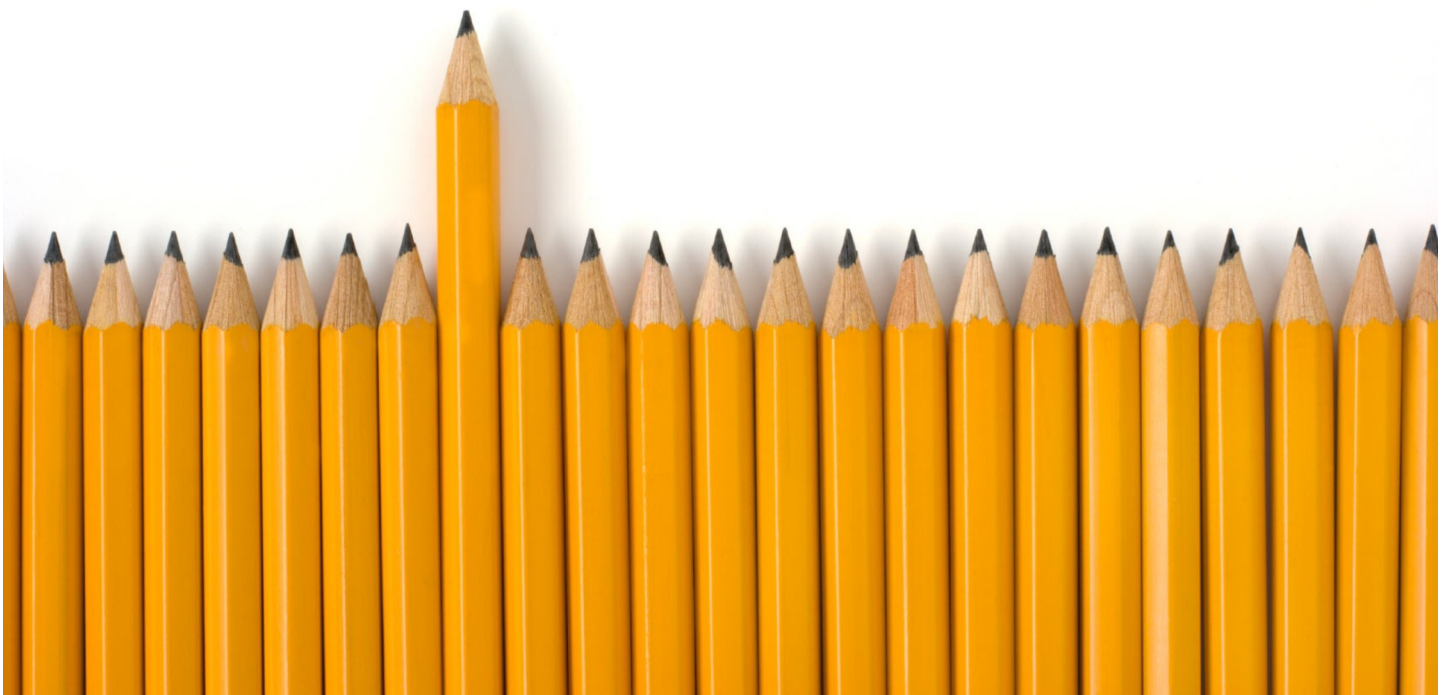




THE GOLD STANDARD

A world class education for every child



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INTRODUCTION

To be ambitious for the next generation is the most natural thing in the world. It is not selfish to want a better life for your children – rather it is one of the driving forces of progress.

I can't be satisfied – nor should any modern Scottish Conservative be satisfied - with a school system until it meets the aspirations of all parents, no matter their background.

We stand for parents who are ambitious for their children, and who rightly want their local state school to provide a high quality education. In Scotland, many parents have no choice but to send their child to their local school, especially those in rural areas. This makes it all the more important to ensure that each school is a great school.

It needs to be said from the offset that, overall, Scottish schools give pupils a good start in life. As the recent OECD report concluded, 15-year olds currently are above the average in reading and science.

But being 'above average' is not enough for me. And it shouldn't be enough for Scotland – a country that once prided itself on the best education system the world had to offer.

On the plus side, pupils have a more positive attitude to their individual school than in many other comparable nations. Teachers and local authorities are working hard to deliver a new curriculum in challenging financial circumstances in the determination to make it a success. These are positives on which we can build.

However, we cannot blind ourselves to the need to improve. We know already that, on the international PISA measure, standards in maths have fallen since 2003. The same OECD report concluded “there are particular challenges confronting secondary schools” in Scotland. At the end of primary school, two-thirds of pupils are performing well or very well in numeracy; yet by the time they reach S2, that figure has fallen to just 40%.

At the start of secondary school, the gap between rich and poor in numeracy and literacy is relatively narrow; by the time pupils leave school, it has widened substantially. Meanwhile, over the last decade, pupils say their “sense of belonging” to their school has weakened. The OECD report found that as many as one in five Scottish schools are just at or below a “satisfactory” rating.

I don't want the international experts to be using words like 'good' 'average' or 'satisfactory' when they are describing our schools in future. I want our schools to be 'great' and, as these studies show, there is currently room for substantial improvement. Ahead of the Scottish Parliament elections, this position paper examines how best we take the first steps towards those improvements in our education system.

Our aim is clear: we want state schools in Scotland to compete with the best in the world. We want to make your local school your school of choice – so that parents who currently feel the need to pay fees or move catchment area to secure a better start for their child, don't have to. They know their local school is as good as any that requires direct or indirect financial outlay.

In short, it is time for us to rise up against the *bog-standard comprehensive*, and work towards *gold-standard schools* in every village, town and city in Scotland.

This paper is based around three areas where immediate improvements can be made.

- **Putting schools in charge**
- **Improving literacy and numeracy**
- **Greater transparency**

Rightly, Scotland has been proud of its tradition of education. We can be proud again by making the right choices for the generations to come. Parents and pupils do not belong to a system. We want them to feel like they belong to a school – a gold-standard school.



Ruth Davidson MSP
Leader, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party

STEPPING STONES TO PROGRESS

In our manifesto for the General Election last year, we set out a series of policy reforms for Scottish schools based on the principles of choice, autonomy and higher standards. We set out our support for a new “Parent Power Bill” to allow parents to set up their own state schools– such as the parents of St Joseph’s Primary in Milngavie, whose primary school is now threatened with closure. We made the case for more schools like Jordanhill School in Glasgow, Scotland’s top performing secondary school, but presently the only one of its kind in Scotland outside Local Authority control. We argued that more choice for parents and more diversity in the system would be good for education, driving up standards. It would encourage innovation, not frown upon it.

These remain our key education aims. But we also want to use the coming Scottish Parliament elections to come forward with ideas and proposals that can be delivered in the short term and around which we can build consensus.

We do not exist in a vacuum and there is a need to propose changes which are deliverable without the need for complex and lengthy legislation or major structural reform. They are practical and pragmatic and they sit within the Scottish educational tradition. These are ideas which have support from many education leaders across Scotland who have experience of the sector.

We argued that more choice for parents and more diversity in the system would be good for education

PUTTING SCHOOLS IN CHARGE

A recent report by the Commission for School Reform – which included a former Scottish director of education, a former Labour Education Minister and numerous school experts - had this to say about the current situation:

“At present... schools are reluctant to take the initiative. This is because the culture of the system as a whole is disempowering. The structure is hierarchical with an ethos of each layer being subordinate to the one above it. There is too little communication or sense that constructive criticism is welcomed..... At present the responsibilities of different tiers of management are ill-defined. The strategic leadership role of government is obscured by a strong tendency to become involved in detail. The freedom of action of schools is too circumscribed. The Commission takes the view that headteachers should be seen as the chief executives of largely autonomous bodies.”

Scottish Conservatives recognise and celebrate the many achievements of Scotland’s school model which has served many pupils so well. We remain of the view that we should supplement the current school system with schools run outside of Local Authority control, where there is demand (such as in Milngavie). But we also believe that, within the present model, there is still huge scope for progress which does not require any major legislative reform. It is time to focus on the outcome, not the process: giving schools and school leaders the room to breathe and the freedom to express their individual values, ethos and character.

We do not propose greater freedom and independence in schools for any ideological reason; we say it due to the evidence - the fact is that schools work best when they have a clear sense of mission and ethos, with strong leaders at every level: from the headteacher’s office to the classroom. We need to focus on delivering this ideal.

Schools work best when they have a clear sense of mission and ethos, with strong leaders at every level

And the evidence suggests that this is not happening in Scotland. As the Commission on School Reform identified, the freedom to lead is “circumscribed”. Headteachers have only notional control over their expenditure. They have very little discretion over the curriculum. Many school leaders report frustration with the system and the lack of autonomy they have.

We believe this must change. If schools choose, this can still happen within the Local Authority system – but we need a culture shift so that there is a clear presumption that power should lie at the level of the school.

Clearly, there are already state schools delivering the highest standards of education which challenge the very best in the independent sector. They should be encouraged to continue with that best practice. They should also be encouraged to partner other schools which have enjoyed less success.

If there are state schools which want to make changes to their schools then they should be permitted to do so without fear of reprisals from the local authority. For example, they may wish to:

- **Be autonomous when it comes to controlling budgets and recruitment policies**
- **Have more options when it comes to entering pupils into different examination systems**
- **Exercise greater freedom over the day to day management of the school**
- **Use support services other than those provided by the local authority**
- **Adopt Teach First in their schools**

In addition to a presumption of local control, there are three other changes we believe should be introduced immediately:

- **Giving the Scottish Attainment Challenge funding directly to schools**

The current SNP Government has recently begun a new Scottish Attainment Challenge to target money at the poorest children. We support the Government's aims, but not the delivery. Giving funds directly to councils is the wrong approach. We believe the funds should be allocated directly to those schools with a high proportion of children from socially deprived backgrounds. We would also ensure the money was given to secondary schools as well as primary schools – to help pupils who may need support to apply for university or a further education.

- **“Buddying up” the best and the worst**

Many of the highest-performing education systems encourage the high-performers to work with the low-performing. There is no equivalent policy in Scotland: most of the projects involve simply increasing funding, or central support for schools, and treat low performing schools in isolation – there is little to encourage school-to-school improvement. At the informal end, this could be ‘buddying’ – sharing of ideas, a few staff, professional development – as much as either school wants.

- **Introducing school “clusters”**

More autonomous schools could organise themselves into “clusters” of primaries and secondaries to ensure a seamless education journey for children. Such “clusters” should have a single tier of management, with strong leaders given a chance to provide strategic direction for schools which currently lack any leadership at all. This may work particularly in rural areas where teacher shortages are most pronounced.

In summary, we need to deliver a correction in the balance of power within our school system. At present, power is shared between central government, local government and schools – a situation tailor made for weakening accountability and responsibility. If everyone is in charge, the danger is that nobody ends up in charge.

We want the school to be in charge. This could still leave Local Authorities with a vital buffer role, standing up for the local interest, preventing an all-powerful central government from extending its power ever further over our institutions. But we want independence for our schools: so they have the freedom to go on and aspire to be gold-standard schools.

IMPROVING LITERACY AND NUMERACY

Last year, the latest Scottish survey of Literacy and Numeracy offered a troubling picture of standards in Scotland. In reading, the proportion of pupils performing well, or very well, had dropped from 83% to 78% in P4, from 90% to 88% in P7 and from 84% to 80% in S2. In writing, standards had fallen in both P7 and S2. The survey also found that less than half of S2 boys (47%) were doing well, very well or performing beyond the level they were being assessed for in writing – down from 58% in 2012. Perhaps most worryingly, in the most-deprived communities, only 41% of S2 pupils were said to be performing well or very well in writing, a drop of 11 points.

The Progress in International Reading Literacy (PISA) study shows, since 2000 Scotland has fallen down the international rankings. As Keir Bloomer, the former Education Director of Clackmannashire Council has written: “In all three areas (reading, maths and science), Scotland’s performance was significantly worse in 2012 than it had been in 2000. The best that can be said is that the rapid decline between 2000 and 2006 appears to have been halted. There is little sign of recovery.”

There is a further reason for wanting to improve literacy and numeracy rates: it is central to the aim of reducing the attainment gap between rich and poor. PISA surveys have shown that increasing reading engagement could mitigate 30% of the attainment gap immediately. If children fall behind in primary school, their chances of developing their skills in later life are vastly diminished. A key task, therefore, is to find ways of improving literacy and numeracy from an early age.

The drive for better literacy and numeracy improvements must begin earlier than in school

Measures we support include:

- **Introducing an ambitious government policy target for all children to read well by the age of 11**
- **Reviewing the operation of the existing literacy and numeracy hubs and intensifying best practice sharing**
- **Meet teachers’ demands to spend more time learning how to teach literacy and numeracy**
- **More support for parental involvement, encouraging schools to do more to give all parents the confidence to make reading, writing and numeracy part of their child’s daily lived experience**
- **A First Minister’s reading challenge, in which pupils would be urged to read a dozen books in pursuit of a prize**

The drive for better literacy and numeracy improvements must begin earlier than in school; as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has identified, high-quality, full-day pre-school education is highly effective in improving literacy and numeracy, particularly for children from low-income families.

The Scottish Conservatives will be publishing our proposals on pre-school childcare later in the spring – the need to encourage literacy and numeracy from this age will form a key part of our thinking.

GREATER TRANSPARENCY

We believe the Scottish Government needs to be far bolder in measuring Scotland's education system

We welcome the Scottish Government's recent decision to reintroduce national testing in primary schools. It is an admission that the current system has not been good enough in creating clear, consistent and transparent data on the state of our schools.

This problem has been identified by numerous reports examining Scottish education. A Joseph Rowntree Foundation report into closing the attainment gap last year concluded that there was a "lack of data, research and evaluation evidence" which "currently hampers progress". The recent OECD report into Scottish education added that "there is extensive professional knowledge but this is not balanced by large-scale research or evaluation projects on Curriculum for Excellence either by universities or independent agencies". It added that "current assessment arrangements do not provide sufficiently robust information". In other words, in answer to the question "is CfE working?" -- we simply don't know.

We believe the Scottish Government needs to be far bolder in measuring Scotland's education system. Only by measuring properly can we assess whether schools are meeting the gold standard we want. The Scottish Government should:

- **Commit to entering Scotland into all the main international education comparison tests: PISA, PIRLS, TIMSS and the OECD Adult Skills Survey**
- **Design the new standardised tests at P1, P4 and P7 to fit into international methodologies – e.g. using PISA-style tests**
- **Improve evaluative research on what works, for example, by offering government match-funding to third sector educational charities**
- **Re-establish an independent inspectorate outwith Education Scotland as it is important that inspection is fully independent from those who set policy**

CONCLUSION

This short paper is aimed at showing that there are immediate, practical and deliverable proposals which can help improve education in Scotland. We want to see gold-standard schools in every village, town and city in Scotland which are available to all. We believe all political parties can unite around these plans so that we progress with real change in the coming Scottish Parliament.

By 2020, the time of the next parliamentary elections, the test will be whether we collectively have seized the moment on improving education in Scotland, or accepted a system under which one in five schools are deemed “satisfactory” – or worse. For Scotland, a country with such a proud tradition of education, that cannot be deemed the limit of our ambitions.

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