



**COMMISSION
ON SCHOOL
REFORM**

**CONSULTATION RESPONSE:
SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT'S
NATIONAL IMPROVEMENT
FRAMEWORK**

NOVEMBER 2015

Membership of the re-convened Commission on School Reform is as follows:

- **Keir Bloomer (Chair):** Education Consultant and former Director of Education
- **Sarah Atkin:** Currently works in a secondary school, formerly a Parent Council Chair and researcher for education conferences. Labour Party member
- **John Barnett:** Scotland Manager at An Ethical Bank and former Parent Council Chairman
- **Jamie Cooke:** Head of RSA Scotland
- **Frank Lennon:** Head of Dunblane High School
- **Judith McClure:** Convener of Scotland-China Education Network and former headteacher
- **Cllr Paul McLennan:** SNP Councillor in East Lothian
- **Ross Martin:** Chief Executive of SCDI
- **Peter Peacock:** Freelance Policy Consultant and former Education Minister.
- **Morag Pendry:** Education Development Manager at the Co-operative Education Trust Scotland
- **Louise Stevenson:** Performance Adviser with Inspiring Scotland's 14-19 Programme

Background

In its report, [By Diverse Means](#), the Commission on School Reform called for the Scottish education system to develop broader measures of success for learners so as to reflect the full range of educational outcomes. It also recommended that higher quality information should be available in relation to each individual young person's performance so as to enable schools to offer better-targeted support.

The Scottish Government has now issued a consultation paper, *Creating a smarter Scotland: A draft national improvement framework for Scottish education*, that seems to be designed to achieve similar outcomes. This short paper offers a view on whether the government's proposals are likely to succeed and how they might be improved.

The proposals

The aim of the National Improvement Framework (NIF) is stated to be to gather information that will allow action to be taken where it is needed. Every family will be given the information they need in order to know how the young person is progressing and what support will be available. Teachers, schools and local authorities will have a clear understanding of what improvements are required at a local level.

The paper repeats the government's commitments to raising standards of attainment for all and to achieving greater equity by closing the attainment gap between poorer and more affluent children.

The centerpiece of the NIF will be a new national standardised assessment which will be taken by all children and young people in P1, 4 and 7 and in S3. It will focus on aspects of literacy and numeracy. There will also be an emphasis on improvements in health and wellbeing through another survey that is still being planned. Information about progress at the different levels of Curriculum for

Excellence is to be published but the format of the publication is to be the subject of further consultation.

The new standardised assessment will replace a variety of other standardised tests being used in virtually every education authority area. The paper claims that it will provide a diagnostic child-level assessment that will help teachers assist learners to improve their performance. It will also secure more consistency and reliability in teachers' professional judgment. Efforts will be made to avoid undesirable unintended effects of national testing.

The government's paper sets out four priorities – improving attainment (especially in relation to reading, writing and numeracy), closing the attainment gap, improving health and wellbeing, and helping young people into sustainable school leaver destinations.

In addition to introducing the new national standardised assessments, the government intends that a number of other steps should be taken. Schools and local authorities will be required to produce annual reports on raising attainment. There will also be a national report on progress in relation to the four priorities. It is intended that there should be an increase in the proportion of schools receiving good inspection reports and in levels of parental satisfaction. There will be further – unspecified – improvements in the range and quality of information available to learners and parents. Progress in closing the attainment gap will be measured using teachers' judgments of pupil progress broken down by SIMD classification. Finally, the paper reiterates existing policies in relation to school leadership and teacher professionalism.

It is indicated that the purposes of the improved information framework will be to identify areas of good practice and areas of concern in order to allow good practice to be spread and concerns to be addressed. The Scottish Government will also use the evidence generated by the framework to inform policy development.

Comment

The Commission welcomes the government's commitment to improve the quality of information available within the Scottish education system. It sees this as an important element in enabling the system to learn from its own experience and to make improvements that will benefit learners. It finds the title 'National Improvement Framework' somewhat incongruous, as the Framework has nothing to say directly about *improvement* as opposed to the gathering of information that may facilitate improvement.

The national standardised assessment

The most controversial aspect of the proposed framework is the introduction of a national standardised assessment. This has been unhelpfully characterised by the Media as 'national testing' thus reviving anxieties associated with the regime of national testing in the 1990s that was abandoned because it was concluded that it did not improve outcomes but merely promoted comparisons between schools. In particular there are concerns about the possible publication of school or local authority league tables which, it is claimed, would lead to unhealthy competition, teaching to the test, narrowing of the curriculum and stress on learners, teachers and others. These concerns have been expressed by teachers' representatives, parents' groups and others and steps will need to be taken to mitigate them if the new form of assessment is to meet with approval.

The Commission, while understanding the concerns, has no objection in principle to a national standardised assessment. Such an assessment:

- Will allow valuable information to be gathered on a comparable basis across the country (although some argue that this can be done adequately on a sampling basis)
- Enable performance to be monitored at a national level

- Provide information that can inform the development of policy
- Replace existing standardised assessments and the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy and need not lead to an increase in teacher workload.

There are, however, significant risks. It is clear that it is intended to gather information at school and local authority levels in a form that would allow the Press to construct league tables. Such league tables will not provide information that will add to useful knowledge about educational performance. They will show that pupils in schools serving affluent areas achieve on average higher levels of performance than those in schools in deprived areas. This is already common knowledge.

There are serious risks that schools will feel obliged (or will be compelled by their local authorities) to take all possible steps to improve league table standing. If this were to happen, it is almost inevitable that more time will be spent on the subjects to be tested and on instructing pupils in test techniques. The consequence would be learning that is narrow and shallow.

There is a simple but controversial way of avoiding these risks. In the Irish republic school test information is excluded from the scope of Freedom of Information legislation. The same could be done here.

The Commission's concerns about the proposed assessment are not, however, confined to the risks associated with publication of results. It has two other significant anxieties.

The first relates to the narrowness of the assessment which will deal only with aspects of literacy and numeracy. Whether or not results are published, this is likely to lead to some narrowing of the curriculum. Other curricular areas – some of which, such as science and languages, are already struggling – will be further marginalised. If this problem is not addressed, an unintended consequence

of introducing a national assessment could be to place the broad and liberal education envisaged by Curriculum for Excellence in danger. This concern is widely shared, for example with representatives of teachers and parents.

These risks could be mitigated by extending the assessment to include literacy and numeracy every year and other curricular areas on a rotating basis. Of course this would increase the size of the assessment but this might be desirable on other grounds also (see below).

The narrow focus on aspects of literacy and numeracy reflects, in our view, an erroneous view of learning, particularly at later stages. The implicit assumption is that other curricular areas can only be accessed if a child has reached a satisfactory level of literacy and that, therefore, the emphasis on literacy needs to be unrelenting until that level is reached. It is, of course, the case that literacy enables learning in most other curricular areas. However, it does not follow that after a child has experienced difficulties with literacy, the best approach is to continue to place this ahead of all other areas of study. Particularly by P7 and S3, some young people are more likely to want to improve literacy skills by being inspired through other areas of study than by a continued emphasis on areas of proven weakness.

The Commission's second concern relates to the perceived purpose of the national assessment. In our view, it can play a very important function by enabling some measurement of progress nationally and thereby influencing policy development. This function is, however, given little emphasis in the paper. Instead, it is claimed that the assessment will provide useful information for learners and parents and offer teachers a useful diagnostic tool.

Improvement takes place in the school. The local authority has an important support role. However, much of the data required to support the improvement process is already available.

There are gaps (that vary from one local authority to another). The framework could usefully have identified a full data set needed to support improvement at school level but it does not do so (see below). The proposed national assessment would not be part of this data set; its function is different as outlined above.

In the Commission's view, these claims are not justified. The test will, it is implied, be short. It will cover a very limited area of the curriculum. Individual learners will be tested only once in three years. The information that this process will yield at the level of the individual learner will be very scant. Learners, parents and teachers will learn little that will be of use to them. The diagnostic value will be negligible.

Unfortunately tests results are less reliable than is commonly assumed. A test tells what a learner could achieve on one occasion in relation to a very small sample of the limited curriculum area tested. The conclusions that can legitimately be drawn are small. If a particular pupil scores 50% in a test, parents almost always assume that this means his/her performance has been proven to be average. An expert in testing knows that all it indicates that, given some crucial information about the degree of reliability of the test and the spread of marks among the class, there is an X% chance that the learner's 'true score' is within Y marks of 50%. Commonly, with a good quality test, this might be a 68% chance of being somewhere between 43% and 57%.

Helpfully, however, the accuracy of test results is greater for a group than for an individual. Thus, the overall class score will have a much higher percentage chance of being within a small range than is the case with a single learner. The larger the group, the greater the accuracy. Local authority results will be far more accurate than class results and national results will be better still. This leads the Commission to conclude that the government should be focusing on what the standardised assessment can say about national performance rather than on its possible value

to individuals. This would have several advantages:

- It properly reflects what this kind of test can do
- Valid conclusions can be drawn about performance nationally
- The effectiveness of national policy can be assessed (which governments tend to be reluctant to do)
- Although the same group of young people is tested only once in three years, the size of the national group is large enough that conclusions can reasonably be based on year to year trends
- It avoids pupils, parents and teachers focusing on information of very limited reliability
- Potentially it avoids the risks inherent in national assessments as it obviates the need for information to be collected at individual, class, school or local authority level.

It is important not to overstate the value of the proposed assessment. Monitoring trends in national performance and reviewing the effectiveness of policy are very worthwhile. They will not, however, in themselves either raise attainment for all or narrow the gap.

Finally, in relation to the proposed national assessment, it is worth noting that the usefulness of the results would be increased if the test were to cover a broader range of the curriculum as suggested above. This would increase the length of the test and possibly also the workload for schools. It would, however, obviate the risk of narrowing the curriculum.

Other issues

The Commission welcomes the frequent references in the paper to the involvement of parents. The role of parents in supporting learning is crucial and this is recognised throughout the paper. The government

suggests that schools and parents should work together on school improvement plans. Most importantly, there is a reference to identifying and addressing 'barriers to parental engagement'. There are, however, no indications as to how this might be done. While it might be argued that this might be out of place in a paper about an information framework, it is to be hoped that the government will soon come forward with recommendations on this important matter.

The government appears to be anxious to give the framework and its operation adequate status. Thus it is suggested that the framework will be built into legislation and that schools, local authorities and the government itself will be required to report regularly on activities to raise attainment. There are clear risks here of creating inflexible arrangements that will not be easily altered in the future. In addition, bureaucratic activity could well take up substantial time that would be better devoted to the task of improvement itself.

It is not clear how the NIF will relate to other sources of information such as Insight. It would be helpful if the framework were to incorporate (or, at least, refer to) all of the key data sources that schools are expected to use. On the other hand, the government's commitment to devote resources to enhancing schools' data using capacity is very welcome.

The Framework appears to promise the development of a data set measuring success in a wide range of educational objectives. However, apart from the national standardised assessment, no other new measures are specified. The Commission believes that there are several other kinds of measure that ought to be included, although not necessarily in quantitative terms. These would include application of the principles of Curriculum for Excellence (especially those such as depth, personalisation and challenge and enjoyment that are less familiar to schools), success in developing skills for learning, life and work (including higher order skills), use of active and interdisciplinary learning and realization of the four aims (capacities) of Curriculum for

Excellence. Many of these would be difficult to measure but that is no reason for excluding them.

There are concerns in relation to the capacity of very many schools to be able administer the standardised assessments due to shortcomings in their IT systems, because the assessments may only be available only on-line. They may also have to be taken during a specified and short period of time (May/June in any year),

Only a short timescale is being allowed for the development and introduction of the standardized assessments. This will limit the degree of engagement with stakeholders which is possible and make it more difficult to secure their support. In the case of such a controversial innovation, this is likely to be a serious drawback.

Finally there is a range of other less important but still significant issues that it would be helpful if the government were to address before the NIF comes into force.

- The SIMD information suggested is insufficient to be helpful to schools and local authorities in developing approaches to closing the attainment gap. The reliance on material based on teacher judgments is, at any rate at this stage, inappropriate.
- There is no reference to the Experiences and Outcomes although it is clear that progression through the Curriculum for Excellence levels is to be the main measure of success. The three-year duration of the levels and the lack of any progression in the Experiences and Outcomes *within* levels are important weaknesses in the existing structure. This matter should be addressed before the NIF is finalised.
- The inclusion of sustainable positive leaver destinations as a measure of success within the framework is very welcome. Some criteria for determining what constitutes a positive

destination will be needed if the figures are not to be distorted by the inclusion of questionable outcomes such as 'activity agreements'.

- One of the aims of the framework is to secure higher expressed levels of parental satisfaction. Nobody could argue with the proposition that it would be desirable to see an increase in the proportion of parents *with good reason* to be satisfied with their children's schools. This, however, is not the same thing. The evidence from reports by HMI strongly suggests that a significant number of parents report satisfaction with schools about which they should have some measure of concern. In the short-term at least, a rise in expressed levels of satisfaction could be counter-productive.
- There is an assumption that all local authorities will be able to provide schools with effective support in implementing and using the framework. In view of the serious financial constraints of recent years, this is open to question.
- There are no references in the NIF to pre-school education. In view of the almost universally recognised importance of the early years in cognitive development, this seems a curious omission in a framework aimed at securing improvement in standards.

Conclusion

The Commission broadly welcomes the government's proposals but considers that they raise a number of causes of legitimate concern. Many of these centre on the operation of the proposed standardised assessment and ways in which its results may be misused. It is vitally important that these are seriously addressed before the NIF comes into operation.

The gathering of information is an important pre-requisite of making changes that will bring about improvement. However, improvement

requires more than information. It needs effective strategies and commitment from all those involved in the process. As yet the government has had little to say on these points. It is now very important that it develops and wins support for ideas on *how* improvement is to be secured.

The Commission believes that any effective improvement process will depend on successful mechanisms for bringing about change. This is an area that has been neglected by governments for decades. The idea persists that policy pronouncements are enough. This is emphatically not the case. The Commission would commend to the government's attention the points made on this matter in its 2013 report [*By Diverse Means*](#).