

THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTE OF SCOTLAND

EIS Response to Education and Culture Committee Consultation on Proposed

Stage 2 Amendment to the Education Bill: National Improvement Framework

- 1 The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), Scotland's largest teacher trade union, shares the ambition of the Scottish Government to reduce the achievement and attainment gap that exists between Scotland's most and least deprived children and young people.

- 2 In addition, the EIS supports the development of policy based on evidence derived from the proportionate collection and analysis of reliable data. The Scottish education system, in our view, is rich with such data, particularly at classroom and school level where it is most usefully deployed in supporting learning and teaching; the EIS would support the use of such data for the purposes of improving equity within the system through the sharing of good practice in 'what works' and through evidence-based targeting of additional resources.

- 3 It would appear, however, that a challenge facing the Scottish Government, and perhaps a frustration felt by it, is its lack of access to the data which is already in abundance within the system at local level. Local authorities, either individually or through the umbrella group of COSLA, seek to utilise the data open to them to inform local service development. A discernible tension appears to exist between the competing functions of Scottish Government, with responsibility for national policy in education, and local government, with its statutory responsibility for delivery. It would appear that Scottish Government wishes to have a more direct leverage in relation to service delivery and certainly the current proposals would mark a significant shift in the direction of Scottish Government around responsibility for both policy and service delivery of education. This may lie behind the drive to place the Framework and its accompanying reporting mechanisms on a statutory footing, although the immediate merits of such an approach are not apparent. The EIS has no developed view on the appropriate balance between the two arms of government, although we recognise the importance of a local dimension in this regard. It is our contention that Scottish education has benefitted from a partnership approach to education and we would wish to see that approach being continued where possible.

- 4 The most contentious element of the proposed National Improvement Framework has been standardised testing / assessment in literacy and numeracy. Early iterations of the NIF, and discussion around standardised tests, seemed to suggest that Scottish Government believed that annual testing of children in P1, P4, P7 and S3, and within a given period of time

in the school calendar (effectively mirroring the SQA exam diet), was the best means by which to gather the requisite data from which to induce attainment improvements – though no evidence was provided to show how this approach would address the attainment gap. The EIS view is that this would be an ill-judged and disproportionate approach to statistical data-gathering- unnecessary and undesirable in terms of methodology, scheduling and scale; at variance with international research evidence on best practice; and counter to the interests of Scottish education as it continues its progressive journey with Curriculum for Excellence.

- 5 The EIS notes that both the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning have taken time to clarify that any approach to standardised assessments would reject the high stakes testing, benchmarking approach of other systems, such as England, which invariably lead to the type of league table, target setting agenda which previously overtook the 5-14 programme and which Curriculum for Excellence, with its focus on assessment being for learning, was developed to counter. Such an approach also results in increased stress for pupils who quickly become aware of the perceived importance of results within such systems.
- 6 Scottish Government has indicated that any new assessments would be diagnostic and predictive in nature and would be used to support, rather than supplant, teacher professional judgement.
- 7 These caveats have been helpful, but they make even more critical, judgements to be made within the NIF around the visibility and purpose of data. Protections need to be put in place to ensure that unintended consequences, such as league tables, are avoided, that perverse incentives which would subvert effective teaching and learning are not created and that the “test” does not become prominent in assessing a child’s progress. A laissez-faire approach to the danger of unintended consequences or the creation of perverse incentives would be a dereliction of responsibility.
- 8 In essence the EIS refutes the argument that crude standardised testing regimes of the kind outlined in the initial draft National Improvement Framework are the key to improving education, including that of Scotland’s poorest children. Time and again, high stakes standardised testing has been shown to cement the disadvantage experienced by children and young people disadvantaged by poverty. It crushes creativity both for learners and for teachers, does not take full account of pupil progress and causes unnecessary stress for the children and young people who are subjected to it. Indeed, around the globe, countries that have adopted such systems are rolling back from them as the negative consequences become increasingly apparent.
- 9 To be clear, the EIS, as a professional association, believes that assessment is absolutely central to teaching and learning. Teachers assess pupils daily, in a wide range of ways; what is observed is fed back to the learner to aid her or his progress, and is shared appropriately with parents. Within the CfE framework considerable effort has been made to support the concept of teacher professional judgement in relation to student assessment and this should not be undermined. These professional judgements are based

on observation, marking of pupil work, collation of data from reading programmes (including reading ages), information from appropriately chosen standardised tests where they are used, the use of various assessment tools from the National Assessment Resource (including test items) and many other sources deriving from the teacher pupil relationship which is at the heart of good classroom practice. Crucially, such judgements are informed by an in-depth knowledge of the young person as an individual, not a statistic.

- 10 Whilst the EIS also acknowledges that within this more holistic approach, diagnostic and predictive assessments, as opposed to system benchmarking tests, can feed effectively into a pupil profile and contribute to teacher professional judgement, we are clear that they must never be allowed to supplant it. Whilst diagnostic assessment, particularly those which link skills broadly to CfE levels, could offer useful data for use by practitioners, it needs to be recognised that the range of skills or knowledge assessed in any single test is relatively limited. To contribute most effectively to teacher professional judgement, several diagnostic assessments, utilising a range of assessment techniques, would need to be available across a broad range of skills and competencies for use by teachers as was appropriate to a child's development needs. In the version proposed within the National Improvement Framework, the range of skills assessed is confined to literacy and numeracy, and even within those broad areas of learning, the focus is restricted to what in the past was referred to as the three 'rs' - a somewhat outmoded, reductionist approach. As such, assessments like these should and could only serve as a small contribution to a wider, more holistic assessment by the teacher. And while literacy and numeracy are central to the CfE approach, research evidence from the USA conducted as part of the review of the "No Child Left Behind" policy, highlights the danger of other subjects being marginalised by the use of narrow and defined "testing" focus. (*Nelson, Howard; 2013; Testing More Teaching Less; AFT*)
- 11 The fact that 30 out of 32 local authorities already make use of standardised tests and yet the attainment gap persists, points clearly to the fact that standardised tests do not offer an easy solution to any of the challenges facing Scottish education. A more systematic approach to diagnostic testing may bring some national rigour to a process already in place but the lessons of National Assessments within the 5-14 programme - where the test became more critical than the learning - should not be forgotten. If a single assessment instrument is allowed to supplant teacher judgement, over a short period of time we will see the re-emergence of teaching to the test and the narrowing of experience within the broad general education, as well as a return to an unhelpful, unhealthy league-tables culture which merely serves to reinforce disadvantage and damage the morale of all within those school communities which are judged to be 'failing'. Whatever the final version of the National Improvement Framework, it is imperative that individual schools do not become the casualties of such a pernicious culture and they must be protected from such. It should be recognised, also, that whilst Scottish Government presents the argument that a Scottish standardised assessment would replace the current varied pattern of use by local authorities of other standard test packages, there is nothing within

the framework to ensure that such an approach is adopted and children could find themselves being subject to increased testing, with its associated stress and pressure, and teachers workload demands being intensified further.

- 12 The EIS view is that any National Improvement Framework should be developed in the context of CfE i.e. should be concerned with a pupil's learner journey through the various levels of CfE, mindful of the fact that progress is a continuum and that levels are not hoops to be jumped through, and that assessment primarily should be about supporting learning. CfE promotes the design of bespoke curricula and accompanying assessment packages, which may include summative tests as a component part of a varied toolkit of assessment, firmly focussed on the child and her/his progress as a learner. Such a model generates a wealth of data that is crucial to the success of the learning process and, importantly, is accessible and useful to learners themselves. In terms of the visibility of data, it is essential that the dashboard focusses on progression through the CfE framework, based on teacher professional judgment, or we are otherwise in danger of undoing almost a decade's worth of commitment to CfE and the primacy of assessment for learning.

- 13 Such an approach would echo that of Finland ("what works"):

Steady improvement in student learning has been attained through Finnish education policies based on equity, flexibility, creativity, teacher professionalism and trust. Unlike many other education systems, consequential accountability accompanied by high stakes testing and externally determined learning standards has not been part of Finnish education policies

(Sahlberg P. 2007 Education policies for raising student learning: The Finnish Approach. Journal of Education Policy 22(2))

- 14 It is assessment for learning which has to be central, not assessment for the purpose of generating statistics to satisfy the demands of the policy-making or accountability agendas, primarily because it is easier to understand what appears as a shorthand summary than to trust the professional judgement and practice of teachers and schools. Teachers must retain the professional autonomy, as supported by Curriculum for Excellence rationale, to identify what is to be assessed, the appropriate assessment methodology and the timing of assessment, in the best interests of learners.
- 15 This would mean that the use of predictive and diagnostic assessments was simply a part of a range of assessments and that the data and insights derived from such should be primarily focussed on the teaching and learning process – available at classroom and school level but subsumed within teacher professional judgment in relation to any culling of performance levels at a public level.
- 16 The use of such assessments should be when a teacher deems it appropriate to support learning and should most certainly not be dictated to by a system wide accountability imperative, i.e. an "assessment diet", which would

simply have the effect of making assessments as high stake as they could be.

- 17 Towards this end, in the EIS view, consideration should be given to an alternative and much more educationally sound approach which can be found within the Finnish education system within which:

At the national level sample-based student assessments ... that have no stakes for students, teachers, or schools are the main means to inform policy-makers and the public on how Finland's school system is performing. Teachers and principals in Finland have a strong sense of professional responsibility to teach their children well but also to judge how well children have learned what they are supposed to learn according to curriculum designed by teachers. (Washington Post, 25 March 2014)

- 18 Elements of this approach are among the aspirations of CfE and reflected in the current use of the *Survey of Literacy and Numeracy*, involving the proportionate gathering of data and providing appropriate system-wide information to inform policy making, whilst avoiding the league table approach. The SSLN is a useful sampling tool which should not be abandoned simply because it produced what some commentators perceive as "bad news" as a consequence of the recent modest dip in literacy results. On the contrary, it may provide a useful design solution for a new national standardised assessment model.

- 19 In light of the instincts of some to seize upon data for ill-purpose, the EIS would urge serious consideration of retaining this kind of approach to data-gathering for the purposes of informing education policy. The recent misinformed discourse about falling standards in Scottish education is a perfect example of how statistics can be interpreted wrongly. Whilst the impact of poverty, and welfare cuts in particular, was evidenced by the slight fall in certain achievement rates and should rightly provoke concern, the fuller narrative of the recent figures was that Scottish schools are continuing to perform at a high level.

- 20 The version of standardised assessments as outlined within the current draft of the National Improvement Framework will act as a blunt instrument with which to administer an unsophisticated political accountability process akin to that which characterises the regime of target-setting and league tables within education south of the border.

- 21 Such tests are largely used for system-wide benchmarking and add little, if anything, to classroom practice. They are often welcomed by politicians and civil servants as they seem to offer "evidence" even if it is in a fairly crude form. Such tests lean towards the high stakes agenda alluded to earlier, however, and are best avoided.

- 22 The existence of nationally collected data does rather beg the question as to what response the data might trigger from both national and local government, particularly in relation to closing the attainment gap. Analysis of data generated by a new version of standardised test is unlikely to tell us anything new about the impact of poverty on educational attainment, for

example. The EIS is therefore deeply concerned that the introduction of legislation around the National Improvement Framework in its current form will result in heavy investment of valuable teaching and learning time, and of money, in a nation-wide standardised testing model which will not improve outcomes for Scotland's poorest children and young people. Rather, there should be careful thought given to how the wealth of existing knowledge within education of 'what works' can be adequately resourced and put into practice. Indeed policy makers should surely identify precisely what extra information they want new tests to elicit, and explain how that will enable teachers to address the attainment gap, before imposing them – the EIS is of the view that designing a "one-size-fits- all" standardised assessment for use across Scotland that would provide policy makers with a framework to positively impact on teaching and learning in the classroom is a challenge that has proved to be beyond the capability of any education system which has attempted such an approach.

- 23 It is the view of the EIS, developed over many years of deep engagement with the issue, that genuine commitment to tackling educational inequality and ensuring improved outcomes in literacy, numeracy, and every other curricular area, requires solid support for schools in their endeavour, as well as the necessary resources. That means, at the very least, facilitating time for teachers at school level to have ongoing professional dialogue around assessment and learning (a key element of the success of the London Challenge), an increased, significant commitment to professional learning for teachers; smaller class sizes; adequate specialist support for learners with additional support needs wherever needed; adequate time for pupil support staff to attend to pupils' pastoral care needs; and the provision of classroom resources and equipment that facilitate learning that has creativity at the core of it. Notwithstanding broader concerns around the previous 5-14 testing regime, it is worth noting the sharp increase in attainment, measured by test results, during the period when S1 and S2 English and Maths classes were reduced to an average size of 20 pupils.
- 24 Any National Improvement Framework needs to concern itself with these elements and a range of factors beyond simply assessment data. Scottish Government's recent commitment on teacher numbers recognises the link between maintaining teacher numbers, in order to lower pupil teacher ratios, and addressing the issue of raising attainment. It also has a policy position on providing access to a teacher in the pre-5 sector (though this commitment requires to be extended to ensure minimum and equitable access to a teacher for children in early years) and a general commitment to reducing class sizes. The Framework needs to encompass the relationship between these resource inputs to desired educational outcomes. Put simply, there is no cheap way of delivering an education system that is both excellent and equitable.
- 25 A further concern of the EIS is the lack of detail provided and discussion with stakeholders about, other components of the National Improvement Framework besides assessment. For the most part, understandably given the threat that it poses to Scottish education, discussions have focused on the inclusion of standardised testing / assessment. The period of consultation allocated to discussion of the NIF as a whole is too short

(September to November) and has not allowed all stakeholders to explore or to reach a full enough understanding of the content of the Framework in its entirety, making it difficult to provide comment on detail which remains vague.

- 26 For example, the relationship between nationally set “drivers” and how these would articulate with local authority plans and then school improvement plans appears to be blissfully unaware of the current 3 year development cycle adopted by schools and Councils in order to ensure that developments are well planned, sustainable and focussed on school imperatives rather than schools becoming a battleground for competing political platforms. Whilst there would appear to have been an acceptance by Scottish Government, in recent times, about the challenge of excessive teacher workload, it is of concern that within the NIF proposals little account appears to have been taken of how School Improvement Planning and Working Time Agreements, both identified within the Tackling Bureaucracy report as key mechanisms for controlling workload pressure, operate in practice. The mechanistic proposals around Education Authority implementation plans and how they link with Scottish Government’s annual setting of priorities, reveals a worrying lack of awareness around how schools actually operate, a reflection perhaps of how little input from an educational perspective there has been around the proposals.
- 27 With regard to the statutory nature of the Framework, the EIS continues to be of the view that the introduction of the amended Bill alone will not deliver significant change in reducing inequalities of educational outcome or impact greatly on the attainment gap created by socio-economic inequality; whilst it creates duties it fails to link those to discernible means to secure the desired outcome. The EIS is in favour of ring-fenced funding linked to specific objectives as a means of driving forward policy aims in a meaningful way.
- 28 The EIS is of the view that education authorities at present have the mechanisms and structures to support actions that are aimed at tackling inequalities of outcome but the resources available for this have been a limiting factor, e.g. smaller class sizes, as Scottish Government has acknowledged, can contribute significantly to reducing inequality of outcome but this requires expenditure. Without increased resources the actions necessary will not happen.
- 29 Finally, with regards to the proposed new reporting arrangements, the EIS would have significant concerns if these placed additional bureaucratic workload burdens on head teachers, teachers and schools -an irony which would not be lost on the profession given the recommendations of the Government led “Tackling Bureaucracy Report”.

In summary therefore, the EIS:

- Rejects the use of national testing as a bench marking tool
- Affirms the importance of assessment for learning as the approach most beneficial to pupil learning
- Supports the continued use of professional judgement within the CfE framework as the basis for system evaluation
- Recognises that diagnostic predictive assessment can support professional judgement, alongside a range of other evidence, but asserts that it should never be allowed to supplant it
- Recognises the accountability imperative of both Scottish and Local Government but underlines the fact that a National Improvement Framework in and of itself simply measures outcomes – improvements within the service require significant inputs also
- Expresses a continued willingness to work with Scottish Government and other partners to build upon the CfE programme and to address the impact of poverty on educational attainment