

AUTONOMY IN THE RIGHT PLACE

School governance reform in Scotland

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Jessica Shields and Russell Gunson | April 2017

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60-SECOND SUMMARY

In the Scottish education system, there is a persistent and entrenched gap in attainment between pupils from the highest and lowest income households. Closing this poverty-related attainment gap is a national priority for the Scottish government. While Scotland has not experienced the substantial changes in school governance and structure which we have seen in recent years in the rest of the UK, there have been reforms to the curriculum and assessment. The Scottish government is reviewing the governance structures and processes of Scottish schools, with the aim of implementing reform focussed on increasing attainment and equity, and this may herald major structural and governance changes for the first time since devolution.

We looked at which school governance changes could have a positive effect on attainment and which have no evidence of effect, or evidence of a negative effect. In addition, we looked at the two main school types in Scotland, denominational and non-denominational, and found, when controlling for intake, that there is no evidence to suggest that school type in Scotland, has an effect on attainment. There is greater evidence to support parental and pupil involvement in the classroom, targeted funding, an evidence-led culture from the classroom up, and encouraging collaboration across schools and regions. However, as our evidence shows, not all types of autonomy would contribute to attainment.

We recommend devolution of decision-making power to the local level as default, and increased accountability. This would see newly strengthened parent and pupil councils, regional education partnerships (REPs), and a further shift within the school system to outcomes-based funding, through school attainment outcome agreements, and evidence-led interventions through a new impact framework.

KEY FINDINGS

There is evidence of a sustained and entrenched gap in educational attainment between children from the richest and poorest households in Scotland. This inequality in educational outcomes starts in early life and persists and widens through childhood into adulthood. Children from low-income households tend to have lower scores in literacy and numeracy and leave school with fewer qualifications.

Closing the income related attainment gap has been set as a national priority by the Scottish government. In 2015, first minister Nicola Sturgeon launched the Attainment Challenge Fund as part of a commitment to devote £750 million of additional funding to closing the attainment gap. While Scotland has not experienced the depth and breadth of reforms to school structure and governance seen in the rest of the UK, there has been reform in recent years focussed on closing the attainment gap, including the introduction of a National Improvement Framework. This sets out the Scottish government's vision for a school

system that delivers excellence and equity, and aligns improvement work across the education system. In 2017, the Scottish government began the process of reforming school governance with a view to reducing educational inequality.

We looked at the two main school types in Scotland, denominational and non-denominational, to consider whether school types in Scotland have an effect on attainment. Our analysis indicated that, when controlling for intake, overall attainment does not differ significantly between denominational and non-denominational schools, and there is no evidence to suggest that one school type or the other has better performance.

We also considered the evidence base to gain an insight into which governance changes may have the best impact on attainment. We found that there is the potential for reforms to school governance to contribute to narrowing the attainment gap, through the devolution of power out from local authorities to headteachers, classroom teachers, parents and pupils. This would support and

promote increased collaboration across schools and regions, and embed an evidence-informed and evidence-generation approach to activities aimed at closing the attainment gap. We also found that, with increased autonomy of the right type and in the right place, should come increased accountability to ensure we focus on outcomes and evidence of impact from the local to the national level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Just as the attainment gap is influenced by many factors outside school – such as household income, health and housing – it cannot be sustainably and definitively closed by school-based activity alone. Schools can play an important role in mitigating the effect of systemic inequalities on educational attainment, but must be supported by a coordinated and sustained whole-system approach. We set out our recommendations for action that can be taken within the school system, and that can contribute most meaningfully to reducing the attainment gap.

1. Decisions in the school system should be made at the most local level possible, with decision-making power devolved to headteachers, classroom teachers, parents and pupils, and only retained at local authority, regional or national level when there is a strong case for doing so.
2. Teachers in the classroom should be empowered and enabled to collect and respond to pupil data in real time, supported by improvements to data collection and use.
3. New parent and pupil councils should be placed at the heart of decisions in relation to the funding and design of activity to close the attainment gap.
4. School attainment outcome agreements should be introduced for Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity funding to promote greater accountability alongside greater autonomy.
5. A new impact framework should be developed which outlines the principles and attributes of best-practice activity on closing the attainment gap in order to reduce low impact activities.
6. As part of the Attainment Challenge Fund, consideration should be given to increasing professionally designed and evaluated wrap-around provision including breakfast, after-school, weekend and holiday provision.
7. Regional education partnerships should be created above the level of local authorities to lead on workforce planning, teachers' continuing professional development and to take responsibility for funding, evaluating and measuring the impact of attainment activity in schools at a regional level.
8. Encouraging schools to work together in clusters on a more formal basis to close the attainment gap could help to spread best practice, positive culture and classroom innovation.
9. The Scottish government, in collaboration with key stakeholders, should review the current learning routes on offer to become a qualified teacher in Scotland, including exploring new fast-track routes into the profession for the highest performing graduates, together with new work-based routes to qualification.
10. The Scottish government, alongside key stakeholders within school education, should develop plans to ensure the school day, school week and school year is poverty-proofed to remove financial barriers to attainment within the school system.

For the full report, including all references, data sources and notes on methodology, see:
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