

# Children in Scotland

every child - every childhood

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## SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION

### NATIONAL IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR SCOTTISH EDUCATION

#### RESPONSE FROM CHILDREN IN SCOTLAND

##### 1. About this Response

Children in Scotland is the collective voice:

- for children, young people and families in Scotland; and for
- organisations and businesses that have a significant impact on children's lives in Scotland.

Our membership is made up of over 500 organisations and individuals working in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

We aim to play a leading role in creating a Scotland where children are valued, every child thrives and every childhood is a good one.

We are pleased to submit this response to the Scottish Government's consultation on the draft National Improvement Framework for Scottish Education (the Framework).

##### 2. Introduction

Driving improvement across our education system to achieve both excellence and equity are the welcome, critical aims of the Framework. Our response will focus particularly on the latter aim of the Framework, which relates to closing the attainment gap.

Scotland's educational monitoring surveys<sup>1</sup> have consistently identified the link that exists between socio-economic status and attainment<sup>2</sup>. Too many children from deprived backgrounds finish their formal education with significantly lower levels of attainment than their more affluent peers<sup>3</sup>, and Children in Scotland welcomes the focus that is being placed upon reversing this long-standing trend.

The educational inequalities associated with socio-economic disadvantage are complex and multifaceted. Delivering the change that is necessary to remove the attainment gap at a national level requires a clear vision and we support the Scottish

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<sup>1</sup> *Assessment of Achievement Programme (1983-2004), Scottish Survey of Achievement (2005-2009), Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (2010-present)*

<sup>2</sup> *Sosu and Ellis (2014) Closing the Attainment Gap in Scottish Education. Joseph Rowntree Foundation: York*

<sup>3</sup> *OECD (2007) Reviews of National Policy for Education - Quality and Schooling in Scotland*

Government in its ambition to lead the national, strategic and evidence-led solutions that are needed to deliver greater excellence and equity in educational outcomes for our children

Along with deepening the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence, the Framework provides a further significant opportunity to ensure that closing the attainment gap is the centre of Scottish education policy.

In many respects Scotland is doing well by international standards in delivering a successful, coherent and flexible education system. Much has been done since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament with regard to internationally recognised drivers of excellence, including a national debate on the purposes of our education system; the introduction of curriculum for excellence, a highly developed system of inspection and self-evaluation, work to develop an integrated system of assessment, including a deeper focus on literacy and numeracy, an overhaul of national qualifications which, among other things, gives greater prominence to raising standards of skills development and embedding the important links between supporting a child and young person's health and wellbeing alongside the development of their learning. Legislation has also been introduced to support greater parental involvement in both their children's learning and the wider development of our education system.

Similarly, international comparisons suggest young people in Scotland are performing well but because other countries are improving at a faster rate, our improvement needs to increase at a faster rate if we are to maintain, let alone improve on, our current position in the international league tables.

In formulating this response, Children in Scotland has consulted widely with our membership, issuing a call for evidence and hosting a roundtable discussion with representatives from the Scottish Government, Education Scotland, the voluntary sector and academics in attendance. In particular we are grateful for the invaluable evidence provided by Carolyn Hutchinson (see Annex A, in particular for Carolyn's analysis and conclusions in relation to high-stakes testing which Children in Scotland endorses).

We found widespread support for the aims of the Framework, but there are real concerns within the sector over a number of its elements as well as with the manner in which consultation with key stakeholders has been managed.

We have concerns, for example, that procurement for aspects of the Framework has commenced alongside this consultation period. We would urge the Scottish Government to take the necessary time to engage meaningfully with professionals and organisations working in the education and children's sector, to listen to the range of views and reflect upon the evidence received before any implementation begins.

This response concentrates on the areas of the Framework where we believe further consideration is necessary.

### 3. Rationale behind the Framework

In Children in Scotland's response to the Education and Culture Committee's call for views on the Education (Scotland) Bill at Stage One, we highlighted the fact that 'inequalities of outcome' was neither adequately defined nor set against any meaningful or measurable benchmarks. We have similar concerns regarding the Framework, which simply posits the term 'attainment gap' without an accompanying definition, thus reducing what is a complex set of issues to an easily identifiable slogan that could be open to different interpretations.

We would like to see this addressed in the opening section of the Framework. Here, not only should 'attainment' and the 'attainment gap' be clearly explained, but it should be defined with as broad an interpretation as possible, encompassing academic attainment as well as, over time, a growing range of indicators of achievement that the Curriculum for Excellence was specifically designed to encompass.

We believe too that the term 'gap' needs some definition. What kind of gap or gaps exactly, and for whom?

The Framework should provide a clear rationale for the changes it proposes to introduce. OECD's publication *Synergies for Better Learning*, is quoted as informing the Framework. It would be helpful if a brief summary of this OECD prospectus for strategic transformation was made available as an easy annex to the Framework, so as to clearly illustrate to the reader the evidence-led provenance for this Framework, and why the Scottish Government believes this approach is necessary. Given Scotland already meets the criteria for several of the OECD's recommendations, what specifically are the gaps and areas for improvement for the Framework to fulfil?

A more fully argued rationale for the Framework would also make it clearer as to how this Framework – which relates solely to improving pupils' performance – is intended to create a more coherent accountability framework. To "close the attainment gap", we need accountability to link improving individual pupil performance, with improving teachers' performance, with schools' performance, with the performance of local and national government and also with the relevant inspection regimes. We welcome this Framework as playing a part in driving greater accountability for achieving excellence and equity in educational outcomes in Scotland, but would like to see the rationale for prioritising the measurement of pupils' performance, in the absence of any other proposals for improvement elsewhere in the accountability chain.

Likewise, we believe that some emphasis should be placed within the Framework on approaches, which will prevent the development of an attainment gap in the first place, rather than solely focusing on activities within the school years aimed at ameliorating inequalities already in existence. This requires a focus on the early years and also on working with parents and families to support pastoral care in schools as part of the implementation of GIRFEC. Children in Scotland would like to

see more explicit reference to these within the Framework, and appropriate links made with other relevant Scottish policy in this area<sup>4</sup>.

#### **4. National Standardised Assessments**

Children in Scotland agrees that assessment is central to teaching and learning. Children and young people cannot learn and develop without confident and effective assessment by teachers. Parents cannot support their children's learning or work in partnership with the school if they do not receive or understand information from the range of assessment tools used by teachers to judge the child's progress and areas for development

Teachers assess pupils on a daily basis; observing what takes place in the classroom, marking pupil's work, glean information from the standardised assessments that are already in place in 30 of our 32 local authorities, and crucially, from having an in-depth knowledge of the young person as an individual.

The Framework argues that in order to promote excellence in attainment and to close the attainment gap, policy makers need to 'know much more, on a consistent and systematic basis, about the performance of our education system'. We agree that local authorities and Scottish Government need evidence that enables them to know how effectively assessment is working to achieve excellence and eliminate inequality.

However evidence drawn from our consultation exercises leads us to conclude that the current proposals introducing new standardised assessments may not secure these goals for the reasons presented below.

Children in Scotland strongly supports evidence-led policy making based on the proportionate collection and analysis of reliable data. However, contributors to Children in Scotland's evidence gathering exercise question whether the introduction of the additional stages of standardised assessments set out in the Framework are capable of providing the valid and reliable evaluations of children and young people's learning required to meet their stated purpose. The aspect of the Framework which has drawn most controversy amongst parents, teachers and the children's sector is undoubtedly proposals to introduce national standardised assessment at P1, P4, P7 and S3. In particular, wide concerns exist as to what additional information benefits can be gained by standardised assessment at P1 and at S3, as against the disbenefits (to individual children and also possibly to their classroom teachers) of introducing new national testing at these learning stages.

Having reliable data both at classroom, school and national level on Scotland's levels of literacy and numeracy are crucial, and Children in Scotland support the emphasis of the Framework on these CfE essentials. We also welcome the recognition of health and wellbeing as the third underpinning essential to successfully delivering CfE to every child in Scotland.

However, to contribute most effectively to teachers; professional judgement, and to provide policy makers with the data required to drive improvements in education,

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Scottish Government's Early Years Framework (2008) and subsequent EY Collaborative and its links with the RAFA Collaborative; its Economic Strategy and its Child Poverty Framework.

several types of assessment, utilising a range of assessment techniques appropriate to a child's development needs and/ or to support analysis of patterns of achievement at population level need to be available across a broad range of skills and competencies. The Framework's current focus may accidentally diminish the importance of classroom teachers, head teachers, and local and national policy makers needing to draw from a diverse data and analysis tool kit, with each assessment tool being suitable to its purpose and its user.

As far as 'test quality' is concerned, and the complexities in tracking progress over time we draw your attention to the argument and evidence set out by Carolyn Hutchinson at Annex A. Assessments for young children at P1 may be especially prone to error and bias, given their limited attention spans and lack of experience of testing and/or computer-based activities, especially those from more deprived backgrounds.

### **High stakes testing**

Both the First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning have stressed that the Framework rejects the "high stakes" approach to benchmarking that is commonly associated with national standardised assessments and qualifications. This approach has led to league tables and the evidence is clear, it leads to significant distortions in judgements on the effectiveness of schools, local authorities and even national educational systems. We welcome the Scottish Government's assurance that it would 'learn from the examples' set by other countries who utilise such tests. Again, we draw your attention to Annex A and the segment of Carolyn's argument relating to the risks of overly-frequent use of forms of standardised assessment which have high stakes for the individual pupils involved in the assessment exercise. While we accept and welcome the level of existing high-stakes assessment under CfE (eg. gaining national SQA qualifications), the value of introducing yet more of such testing (e.g. at S3) is not demonstrated.

In addition, as far as schools are concerned, a testing process where every relevant pupil might have to be tested at the same time, will place them under a significant burden, especially for those schools in smaller authorities. In many schools, we have been informed the ICT and staffing resources simply cannot be marshaled within this concentrated time period.

Quite rightly, schools and teachers will be expected to improve on their attainment results each year, and so they should be. We strongly welcome our nation's growing ambition for excellence and equity in educational outcomes, and the leadership and working culture found in our best schools, which motivates, supports and celebrates excellence in classroom teaching. Nevertheless, the evidence is clear that the use of high stakes testing can result in unintended and undesirable outcomes in the classroom such as reduced motivation, higher stress levels and narrower curricula which may result in negative impacts for pupils, teachers and schools, as well as on national education policy and decision making.

In terms of pedagogy, there is strong evidence<sup>5</sup> (including from National

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<sup>5</sup> Grek and Ozga (2010)

Qualifications in Scotland) that high stakes testing encourages teachers to ‘teach to the test’, focusing on the topics and kinds of tasks that are most likely to be tested. Similar concerns were raised by those contributing to our evidence gathering exercise to inform this response, although it was noted too that ‘testing to the test’ is a reasonable course of action so long as the tests are the right ones. In addition, research from the USA conducted as part of the review of the ‘No Child Left Behind’ (NCLB) policy<sup>6</sup>, as well as studies into the high stakes testing introduced by the New Labour government in England<sup>7</sup>, highlight the danger of some subjects being marginalised if the focus for testing is too narrowly defined. The Scottish Government must ensure that the full intended depth and breadth of Curriculum for Excellence is protected and enhanced by the introduction of this Framework.

Natalie Mons, in her comprehensive review of international evidence, concluded that there appears to be no empirical consensus on the benefits of standardised assessment from national or international research, research focusing on the relationship between testing and effectiveness or on the links to educational inequalities. She found that in the literature on national situations or containing international comparisons, the relationship between effectiveness and national testing appears to be unpredictable, and there is no automatic, one-to-one correlation.<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion,,we welcome the recognition in the Framework of the importance of assessment and agree that the evidence supports the important role that low stakes standardised or national sampling assessment can have in improving our knowledge of educational attainment. We also welcome the intention to improve the diagnostic assessment tools available to support teachers to understand and develop their confidence in responding to the child’s learning needs. Obviously, we agree fully with the critical focus on improving literacy and numeracy.

However, the prospect of additional high stakes testing of every child and young person at P1, P4, P7 and S3 is a source of serious concern to Children in Scotland and we do not believe that the case has yet been made to justify this. .

### **Better use of what already exists**

For all the reasons outlined above Children in Scotland believe that the focus for the Scottish Government should not be on how we introduce new standardised assessments. However, that is not to say we could not better utilise the information we already have and integrate it more effectively into the policy decision making process, addressing any specific data gaps as needed

The Scottish Government, Education Scotland and Local Authorities have all agreed that the Scottish education system possesses a good deal of assessment data. It is held at various levels, and in various ways, across the system particularly at

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<sup>6</sup> see e.g. Berliner 2011, Dee and Jacob 2011, Hursh 2005, Nichols and Berliner 2007

<sup>7</sup> (e.g. Alexander 2011, West 2010),

<sup>8</sup> Natalie Mons (2009) Theoretical and real effects of standardised assessment: background paper to the study National Testing of Pupils in Europe: Objectives, Organisation and Use of Results. EACEA; Eurydice.

classroom and school level<sup>9</sup>. Some 30 out of 32 local authorities already make use of standardised assessments. More can and should be done to help align and integrate our use of this voluminous data. We welcome that the Framework aims to improve our capacity in this regard.

Such alignment, linkages and sharing of learning from the standardised assessments that are already in place means we do not need to rush to introduce yet more high stakes national testing at points in the child's learning journey, in order to make sensible and evidence-led policy decisions that would enable us to improve education in Scotland. It is already possible for the Scottish Government to use existing evidence to assess a local authority's performance in closing the gap as seen in Audit Scotland's report on our education system.<sup>10</sup> Equally importantly, several local authorities already use their standardised assessments tools to judge where improvement is needed in their schools to improve excellence and close the gap in both their primary and secondary schools. Why is it not possible to get these organisations to agree to work together to standardise the information they hold to enable judgements to be made on current effectiveness and where improvement is required. What practical differences will be achieved by standardised assessment of every child and young person in P1, P4, P7 and S3? Our consultation has found that the Framework, in this regard, has not convinced of the need for their introduction.

### **The Health and Wellbeing of Children and Young People**

As mentioned earlier, Children in Scotland welcome the inclusion of health and wellbeing of children and young people as a key priority within the Framework. We would welcome further indication and assurance as to how exactly children and young people's health and wellbeing will be measured, supported and enhanced.

We would also welcome assurance as to how some of the known disbenefits (to individual children's health and wellbeing) associated with the introduction of high stakes standardised assessment will be acknowledged and managed. We have set out the evidence that this increases the levels of stress pupils are under, especially where pupils feel under pressure to do well because of the perceived importance of the test<sup>11</sup>.

Young children of the same chronological age may be at very different stages of social, cognitive, and emotional development at the time of assessment; if a young child subsequently experiences a rapid developmental growth spurt, results could quickly become out-dated and therefore misrepresentative; a misrepresentative result may also underestimate the child's potential and lead to inappropriately limited provision or expectations<sup>12</sup>.

High stakes standardised assessment has been shown to cement the inequalities disadvantaged children and young people experience, as such pupils may be more

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<sup>9</sup> National Qualifications and the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) for example

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/local/2014/nr\\_140619\\_school\\_education.pdf](http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/local/2014/nr_140619_school_education.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Natalie Mons (2009) Theoretical and real effects of standardised assessment: background paper to the study National Testing of Pupils in Europe: Objectives, Organisation and Use of Results. EACEA; Eurydice.

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likely to receive repetitive teaching and preparation which is narrowly focused on easily measured aspects of literacy and numeracy rather than the engaging, challenging and well-rounded programmes offered to their higher-achieving peers<sup>13</sup>.

Pupils with Additional Support for Learning Needs are particularly vulnerable from such an approach. We are dismayed that this group of children and young people are not even mentioned in the Framework. This must be redressed. As the provider of Enquire, Scotland's national advice service for additional support for learning, we strongly advocate for greater emphasis to be placed within the Framework on additional support for learning needs.

Children in Scotland recommends that the scope of the framework is "proofed" to ensure that its focus enhances the health and wellbeing in children and young people from the earliest age, recognising the importance that wellbeing has on the child's capacity to enjoy school, to enjoy learning and therefore to achieve and to attain to their full potential.

## Early Years

Research has shown that differences in children's cognitive development linked to parental background can be seen as early as 22 months and studies indicate that children from higher-income households significantly outperform those from low-income households at age 3 and 5. By age 5, there is a gap of 10 months in problem-solving development and 13 months in vocabulary<sup>14</sup>. If we only start to address the attainment gap at school age, we are already starting too late.

A child's experience of early learning and childcare between the ages of 0-3 will have a profound and lasting impact on their expectations and life-chances, in terms of their social and cognitive development, and particularly their ability to form relationships, learn and think collaboratively.

Much good work has been done to improve and develop learning in the Early Years sector recently in Scotland, and the schools sector has much to learn from this work about working in intergenerational partnerships amongst families, care-providers, health and social services, educators and policy-makers to mitigate the effects on children's learning and development of poverty and deprivation<sup>15</sup>.

A more joined-up, coherent approach at policy level, based on strong partnerships and focusing on the aims and principles of *Getting It Right For Every Child* (GIRFEC), taking education as being an on going process, literally cradle to grave, could make a real and lasting difference to children's futures.

Children in Scotland would therefore strongly recommend that policies in support of the early years, and appropriate and timely support to families that need it, link

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<sup>13</sup> Natalie Mons (2009) Theoretical and real effects of standardised assessment: background paper to the study National Testing of Pupils in Europe: Objectives, Organisation and Use of Results. EACEA; Eurydice.

<sup>14</sup> Sosu E & Ellis S (2014) Closing the Attainment Gap in Scottish Education, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, *Early Years Framework*, Scottish Government, 2008; *Meeting Scotland's Childcare Challenge, Report of the Commission for Childcare Reform*, Commission for Childcare Reform, 2015.



coherently with this Framework for the school years, so that we may prevent the development of an attainment gap from day one<sup>16</sup>.

### **Parental Engagement**

The key factor shaping unequal educational attainment relates to the child's home situation including their learning environment at home,, yet this is little referenced by the Framework.

If we are to achieve the meaningful change desired and remove the attainment gap, we need to support families more effectively to enable them to give their children the best possible loving and supportive home environment in early life. This applies equally to carers. Such support should include, where necessary, how parents and carers can engage fully in their child's learning at home as well as in early years settings.

The National Parenting Forum of Scotland indicate that at present there is considerable variation across the country with regards to the quality of parental involvement and how information is shared with parents. NPFS is happy that parental involvement has its own 'basket' within the Framework but suggests that more information is required to describe how this will be achieved, and how parents will be kept informed. Furthermore particular consideration needs to be given to parents who face barriers to involvement.

Children in Scotland support this position and believe that local authorities strategies should make explicit reference to supporting families and the home learning environment.

### **Conclusion**

As the First Minister points out in her introduction to the Framework, 'Excellent learning and teaching is key to raising attainment and closing the gap in attainment between those in our most and least deprived areas'.

Long-term, sustained and evidence-led strategies that are targeted on improving every aspect of the lives of those affected by poverty are required<sup>17</sup>, and while this Framework represents an important and necessary statement of intent, it must form part of a series of measures aimed at tackling this longstanding issue if it is to achieve the outcomes that are desired.

We agree fully with the recognition of the transformative role that schools and teachers can play in supporting children and young people to become more confident, successful, responsible and effective learners prepared with the knowledge, skills and attributes required to be successful adults.

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<sup>16</sup> The Education Endowment Fund provides examples of the most effective evidence based interventions within the early years

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/early-years/>

<sup>17</sup> Cooper and Stewart (2013) *Does money affect children's outcomes? A systematic review*

Finally, we support fully the aims of the Framework and want to support its success. For the reasons set out above, we believe the proposals need modification and we offer **the following ten recommendations** in support of its aims:

1. Provide a clear definition of “attainment gap” which schools and their partners can understand and work together in closing. Qualifications are an important measure but not the only one. This definition may need to include a number of measures at both primary, special and secondary school levels.
2. Place greater emphasis on actions to prevent the development of attainment gap, with a specific emphasis on the early years
3. Consider the introduction of appropriate assessments to support the transition from pre-school to primary school, without resort to national standardised assessment pre-P1.
4. Before proceeding to introduce new standardised assessments in P1, P4, P7 and S3, identify the use which can be made of existing evidence at these levels, including improving the national sampling exercises at P4 and P7 for literacy and numeracy (SSLN), to assess progress in securing excellence and equity .
5. Suspend current procurement arrangements while these proposals are under parliamentary scrutiny. This will also allow learning from the current testing and piloting arrangements in the 7 local authorities, which are the raising attainment “pathfinders”.
6. Any national standardized assessments should not be introduced in P1 (for reasons given above) or in S3 until evidence is clear that all the recommendations of the Scottish Government’s Working Group to tackle Bureaucracy (March 2015) have been fully implemented.<sup>18</sup>
7. Arrangements for the completion of any national standardised assessments should be made in line with the teacher and school’s assessment of when the child or young person is ready. There should be no national day, week or window when these must be completed.
8. Include the implications for all children and young people with additional learning support needs and how this Framework will address these.
9. Include provision for children and young people who require Additional Support for Learning
10. Working closely with NPFS and others, to provide greater encouragement for parental engagement with schools and learning within home settings.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0047/00473538.pdf>

## **ANNEX A**

### **CREATING A SMARTER SCOTLAND: A DRAFT NATIONAL IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR SCOTTISH EDUCATION**

### **EVIDENCE TO INFORM A RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION FOR CHILDREN IN SCOTLAND**

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[Please note that the views expressed in this paper are my own, and not to be taken as representing those of colleagues in Glasgow University or any other organisation with which I am currently associated.]

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1. The first two sections of the Framework document, *Education in Scotland and Our Vision*, provide the context for the Improvement Framework, affirming the broad purposes of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) as the basis for Scotland's aspirations for its children and young people. The four purposes of CfE, consistent with international research about the nature of learning and the goals of education, reflect the principle that learning for life goes well beyond a focus on conventional bodies of knowledge and strategies for using and applying this knowledge flexibly, to include personal, interpersonal and social skills, the affective dimensions of positive beliefs about oneself as a learner, and skills in monitoring one's own thinking and learning, with cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning thus combined and closely connected to motivation – the adaptive competence of '21<sup>st</sup> century skills'<sup>19</sup>.
- 1.2. The principle that education in these terms is essential to the country's success, both economically and socially, is strongly supported by international evidence. The OECD/CERI study into the *Social Outcomes of Learning* in particular considers evidence that lifelong learning can improve health and social as well as economic outcomes for its citizens<sup>20</sup>. Further, education develops individual attributes and competences, but also shapes the choices people make about the environments in which they live, these environments in turn affecting their behaviour. The proposed model thus stresses the interaction between direct and indirect effects of learning.
- 1.3. *Education in Scotland* also acknowledges the effects of poverty and deprivation on educational outcomes for children, and the potential of a well-designed education system to mitigate these effects and improve outcomes for the most disadvantaged, to the benefit of all. Both international studies and Scotland's own long-running national monitoring survey (Assessment of Achievement Programme 1983-2004, Scottish Survey of Achievement 2005-2009, Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy 2010-date) have consistently pointed up the link between socio-economic status and measured attainment, but finding ways to address these difficulties through 'improvement' in education has proven to be a formidable challenge, here as elsewhere.
- 1.4. This last point makes it particularly disappointing that the Framework makes scant reference to the earliest years. Recent research suggests that in the 0-3 years the child's experience of care and associated social and cognitive development and health and wellbeing, and particularly their ability to form relationships, learn and think collaboratively and develop the language to do so, will have a profound and lasting impact on their expectations and life-chances. Much very good work has been done in

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<sup>19</sup> Istance and Dumont (Eds) *The Nature of Learning: Using Research to Inspire Practice*. OECD/CERI

<sup>20</sup> *Understanding The Social Outcomes of Learning*,

<http://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/understandingthesocialoutcomesoflearning.htm>

the Early Years sector recently in Scotland, strongly supported by Scottish Government, to improve and develop learning in these terms for our youngest citizens, and the schools sector has much to learn from this work about working in intergenerational partnerships amongst families, care-providers, health and social services, educators and policy-makers to mitigate the effects on children's learning and development of poverty and deprivation<sup>21</sup>. A more joined-up, coherent approach at policy level, based on strong partnerships and focusing on the aims and principles of *Getting It Right For Every Child* (GIRFEC), taking education as being an ongoing process, literally cradle to grave, could make a real and lasting difference to children's futures.

- 1.5. In terms of *Our Vision* therefore, the focus on *Excellence* and *Equity* is laudable, but 'raising attainment in literacy and numeracy' (especially when later in the document the references are to reading, writing and numeracy rather than encompassing all of literacy as defined in CfE) seems somewhat narrowly focused, when the previous section suggests that it is laying better foundations for learning at the earliest stages for children at risk, and sustaining that effort through the school years, could improve outcomes for them across the purposes of CfE, including the integrated skills of literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing across learning.

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, *Early Years Framework*, Scottish Government, 2008; *Meeting Scotland's Childcare Challenge, Report of the Commission for Childcare Reform*, Commission for Childcare Reform, 2015.

## 2. The purpose of the framework

- 2.1. Having set out the overall aims of equity and excellence, the document then explains the purpose of the Framework to 'bring together key information to evaluate performance' of the education system in securing improvement in outcomes for children, building on existing good practice. Drawing on the OECD's *Synergies for Better Learning*, it identifies six 'drivers of improvement' that will combine together to ensure improved outcomes for learners: school improvement; school leadership; teacher professionalism; assessment of children's progress; parental involvement; and (gathering and using) performance information.
- 2.2. Missing from this list are shared understanding of a clearly defined curriculum and progression (what is to be learned) and associated pedagogy (how it can be learned), including assessment (how well it has been learned) that are at the heart of day-to-day learner-focused classroom activity. Assessment on its own, without close integration with the curriculum or pedagogy, will have limited validity and yield little useful information about pupils' achievement of curriculum levels.
- 2.3. Reading through the OECD's *Pointers for Policy Development from Synergies for Better Learning*, it is clear that in many respects Scotland is already well ahead by international standards in shaping a coherent and flexible education system, which can adapt readily to the changing demands of learning in the 21st century; and is very well-placed to continue to work towards its stated educational aims. Much has been done since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament with regard to the identified drivers, including a revised curriculum, a highly developed system of inspection and self-evaluation, work to develop an integrated system of assessment, an internationally recognised national survey of achievement, and guidance based on evaluation evidence and research for local authorities and schools, to ensure that each of the drivers continues to contribute to improvement.
- 2.4. In Scotland we already have ample evidence and data to bring together and draw on. The assertion in the Framework that 'we need to know much more, on a consistent and systematic basis, about the performance of our education system' is therefore something of an under-estimation of the extent of our recent developments, especially the proposal for a national standardised assessment 'at its heart'. The issue perhaps is how to better integrate and use the information we already have about our developing system as feedback to inform planning for continuing improvement.

### 3. **Standardised assessment: what we need to know**<sup>22</sup>

- 3.1. Since the Framework makes a national standardised assessment a key part of the proposed Framework, it may be worth clarifying what this means, and what the impact of such an assessment for 5-15 year-olds might be. A standardised test is any form of test that requires all test-takers to answer the same questions, or a selection of questions from a common bank of questions, in the same way, and is also scored in a 'standard' or consistent way. While different types of tests and assessments may be 'standardised' in this way, the term is usually associated with large-scale tests administered to large samples or populations of pupils.
- 3.2. Standardised tests may include multiple-choice items, true-false questions, short-answer questions, essay questions, practical tasks or a mix of question types. Standardised testing makes it possible to compare the relative performance of individual pupils or groups of pupils. In Scotland, National Qualifications and the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN), as well as the OECD's international PISA survey, are examples of standardised assessments currently in use. In addition, local authorities use a range of commercially produced standardised tests to measure attainment in reading and maths locally in their schools and to compare their pupils' and schools' performance.
- 3.3. Standardised tests are often in pencil-and-paper format but are increasingly being administered on computers connected to online programs. Multiple-choice, true-false or single mark item formats are widely used for large-scale computerized testing because they can be scored quickly, consistently and inexpensively by computers and are thus held to be a fair and objective way of assessing student achievement, removing the potential for marker bias and subjectivity. It should be recognized, however, that subjective human judgments still affect the technical quality of tests, for example in the devising, selection and presentation of questions, in the subject matter and phrasing of questions and rubrics linked to the curriculum and in setting pass marks which determine pass rates or the proportion of pupils deemed to be achieving a particular level.
- 3.4. Open-ended written or practical responses of the kind used in National Qualifications and the SSLN to evaluate the more complex learning and skills of CfE, on the other hand, need to be marked by humans using the same guidelines or rubrics to make consistent evaluations, a less efficient and more costly approach that is also considered to be more 'subjective'. It is possible, however, to achieve a good degree

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<sup>22</sup> The information in this section draws on the very helpful advice from the American Great Schools Partnership website *The Glossary of Educational Reform for Journalists, Parents and Community Members* at <http://edglossary.org>

of consistency amongst markers by careful training, collaboration and experience (also sometimes referred to as 'sharing standards'). If markers are practising teachers, this approach also has the benefit of building teachers' capacity in both designing valid assessments and making sound and consistent assessment judgments.

- 3.5. The debates around standardised testing generally focus on whether they can provide valid and reliable evaluations of student learning for their declared purpose; and the ways in which the tests are used (high-stakes or low-stakes). Standardised testing is more likely to be controversial when test scores are used in a high-stakes way, to make important public decisions about educational policies, schools, teachers and pupils. It is less likely to be contentious when it is used to diagnose learning needs and improve provision. However, the line separating these two purposes is hard to draw in practice, and as in the Framework document, policy-makers often mistakenly assume that one test can be used for both purposes without possible perverse or unintended consequences for both



#### **4. Dependable evidence of learning**

- 4.1. Newton and Shaw in the UK<sup>23</sup> recently proposed a framework for evaluating assessments that includes their technical quality and fitness for purpose; whether the data they provide, along with other relevant evidence, contribute something new to understanding of pupils' progress; and what would be the human and financial costs and intended and unintended consequences of the assessments for the quality of pupils' and teachers' overall experience of learning.
- 4.2. With regard to technical quality, there is no such thing as a perfectly valid and reliable test of student knowledge and skill acquisition, so that performance data can never reflect what pupils know or can do with complete accuracy. Many testing experts therefore caution against using a single standardised test score as a measure of educational performance, since both the tests and data reporting are inevitably subject to some error and bias. They advise using a range of different assessments to determine achievement and progress, especially to make important decisions about planning their future learning.
- 4.3. Some of the factors which can affect the quality of the data, for example, are test items, questions, and problems that do not relate adequately to published curriculum outcomes; ambiguously or poorly-worded questions; errors or ambiguities in marking instructions; poorly calibrated or misrepresentative performance levels and cut-off scores; and mistakes in recording, processing, analysis or reporting of test results. All of these can apply equally to computer-based systems, which are by no means immune to errors.
- 4.4. An assessment may also be biased if the design, or the way results are interpreted and used, are more suited to one group's linguistic and cultural experiences than another's and so systematically disadvantage certain groups of pupils, for example pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, pupils whose first language is not English, or pupils who are not fluent in local cultural customs and traditions. Some test formats may also have built-in bias. For example, some evidence suggests that timed, multiple-choice tests may favour certain styles of thinking more characteristic of males than females, such as a willingness to risk guessing the right answer or questions that reflect black-and-white rather than more nuanced logic.
- 4.5. Tests for young children (P1, P4) may be especially prone to error and bias, given their limited attention spans and lack of experience of testing and/or computer-based activities, especially those from more deprived backgrounds. Teachers administering tests may fail to create calm test-taking conditions, affecting pupils' mental and emotional state during testing; they may give pupils misleading advice, and even help them to answer correctly. Young children of the same chronological age may be at

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Newton and Stuart Shaw (2014), *Validity in Educational and Psychological Assessment*. London: SAGE

very different stages of social, cognitive, and emotional development at the time of testing; if a young child subsequently experiences a rapid developmental growth spurt, test results could quickly become outdated and therefore misrepresentative; a misrepresentative test result may also underestimate the child's potential and lead to inappropriately limited provision or expectations.

- 4.6. Some error and bias in assessment is both expected and unavoidable, particularly as systems grow in scale. National data systems are particularly prone to error, given the complexities of collecting data from hundreds of schools on the performance of tens of thousands of pupils. Most large-scale education data of the kind proposed in the Framework are therefore explicitly recognised as estimates, with consequent implications for their use, especially when the stakes are high for pupils, teachers and schools. The complex business of tracking over time is especially prone to inaccuracies and errors, making the demand for year-on-year improvement in the Framework particularly problematic.

## **5. Use of data from standardised tests**

- 5.1. The difference between 'high-stakes' and 'low stakes' testing lies in the way the results are used, not the design of the test. Making both high- and low-stakes use of data from the same standardised tests, as is proposed in the Framework, is not generally considered to be either straightforward or advisable, since the one is likely to impact on the other in unpredictable ways.
- 5.2. The results of a 'low-stakes test' such as the SSLN or a 'diagnostic' reading test might be used along with feedback from other assessments to evaluate the achievement of individual pupils or groups of pupils against published curriculum 'standards'; to identify gaps in pupils' learning and progress; to identify their learning problems and additional support needs; and to inform teachers' forward planning to support their pupils' learning. All of these uses are mentioned in the Framework. The results of low-stakes tests are important for teachers and their pupils but the results are not published or attributed. The main thing is that they carry no significant or public consequences in terms of the reputation of pupils, teachers or schools.
- 5.3. A high level of dependability in the technical sense may not be as important for low-stakes assessment as a good match to what has been taught and agreement amongst teachers that they provide a credible account of a pupil's learning; but their provision of examples of good quality, dependable assessments, closely linked to the curriculum and progression, can provide a means for teachers to collaborate to quality assure their professional judgments for consistency across schools and local authorities.
- 5.4. A 'high-stakes' test on the other hand is any test whose results are used to make important decisions about pupils, teachers, schools, or districts, most often for the purpose of accountability, where the Government seeks to ensure that schools and teachers are effective. A particular administration may also wish to determine whether educational policies are working as intended, and to demonstrate to the public that their policies are in the best interest of children and society. It is these purposes that are most prominent in the Framework document, and that require assessments with a high degree of technical accuracy and dependability.
- 5.5. Data from high-stakes tests are typically intended to 'drive' the improvement of schools, teaching quality and student achievement, to determine rewards and sanctions for schools and to inform strategies for school improvement. Average or aggregate results for schools and authorities will be publicly reported, on the grounds that evaluation of the performance of schools should be transparent; that policy-makers should seek to regulate schools and ensure quality; and that parents and the public have the right to know when a school is 'underperforming' and have the opportunity to advocate for improvement. It is often asserted that the use of data from high-stakes tests in these ways will focus attention on the tests and motivate schools and staff to make changes

in order to improve scores ('drive' improvement). The results may also be used to focus on improving outcomes for particular groups of pupils, for example those from deprived communities, low-income households or minority ethnic groups.

- 5.6. In the USA, and then in the UK (apart from Scotland), at the primary and early secondary stages 'standards' have been represented by curriculum 'levels' in the form of progressive performance descriptors and the results of statutory high-stakes standardised tests linked to these levels have been used to track school performance. The tests are administered across stages to measure how well pupils are meeting the standards. By publicly reporting the test scores achieved by different schools and by tying those scores to rewards, penalties, and funding, the use of statutory tests aims to hold schools deemed to be 'underperforming' in the tests accountable for improvement and to close long-standing achievement 'gaps'.
- 5.7. Under the terms of the No Child Left Behind Act, for each year that a school fails to meet a state's benchmarks for improvement, the stakes are raised and sanctions may become more severe. Ultimately, a low performing school might be closed, converted to a charter school, put under the management of a private company, or taken over by a state department of education, among other possible outcomes. There are similar consequences for 'failing' schools in England.
- 5.8. In Scotland, National Qualifications in the Senior Phase are 'high stakes'. The results are used by the Government and local authorities, both to award qualifications to pupils at different NQ levels ('standards') and to evaluate the effectiveness of schools, departments and teachers in delivering them. Schools are compared on the basis of the results, amongst other factors. For teachers, the results may contribute to their status and promotion prospects. The Framework now appears to be advocating similar arrangements for P1-S3.
- 5.9. In summary, the arguments in favour of the high-stakes use of the results of standardised tests are held to be that they provide easily understandable numerical information about school and student performance that educational leaders and policy makers can use to develop new school-improvement strategies; they give parents, elected officials, employers and the wider public confidence about the quality of schools' provision; they drive improvement by holding teachers accountable for ensuring that all pupils learn what they are expected to learn; they motivate pupils to work harder, learn more, and take the tests more seriously; and they reveal areas of educational provision that can be targeted for reform and improvement. They can thus promote higher student achievement and help reverse the cycles of low educational expectations and achievement of disadvantaged student groups.
- 5.10. The disadvantages on the other hand of this approach are held to be that standardised tests can only evaluate a narrow range of achievement using inherently limited

methods. Since all pupils will be administered the same short test(s) they will inevitably have limited curriculum coverage for each individual pupil; any claims about diagnostic value at pupil level should be therefore be treated with great caution. At the same time, the assessments will likely have questionable value for meaningful monitoring of the education system as a whole. There is strong evidence, including from National Qualifications in Scotland, that they encourage teachers to ‘teach to the test’, focusing on the topics and kinds of tasks that are most likely to be tested, rather than teaching a wider range of knowledge and complex skills.

- 5.11. Critics say that the practice may in particular reduce the overall quality of teaching and learning for the very pupils who are the intended beneficiaries of high-stakes testing: because of strong pressure on schools and teachers to improve test results, these pupils may be more likely to receive repetitive (rather boring) teaching and test preparation narrowly focused on easily measured aspects of reading, writing and maths rather than the engaging, challenging and well-rounded programmes offered to their higher-achieving peers. This in turn may reinforce negative stereotypes about their intelligence and academic ability and limit their future prospects even more. Some research studies attribute pupils’ loss of motivation and increased failure and dropout rates with high-stakes use of test results and its consequences, also limiting pupils’ future opportunities.
- 5.12. The high-stakes use of results may also contribute to doubtful practice among teachers and pupils who want to avoid the consequences of poor performance. In the USA there are examples of teachers and schools changing pupils’ responses, giving pupils correct answers, or excluding pupils likely to perform poorly in the tests from the school. Similar consequences of the high-stakes uses of test data have been experienced in England, and even in Scotland when data from ‘testing when ready’ for 5-14 was centrally collected and reported. In particular, the demand for instant and ‘year on year’ improvement in test results, also a feature of the Scottish Improvement Framework, is neither realistic nor helpful, as it places great pressure on teachers and struggling pupils and prompts negative competitiveness and unprofessional practice. In short, repeatedly weighing the baby will not promote its healthy growth.
- 5.13. Natalie Mons, in her very comprehensive review of international evidence, concluded that there appears to be no empirical consensus on the benefits of standardised assessment from national or international research, research focusing on the relationship between testing and effectiveness or on the links to educational inequalities. She found that in the literature on national situations or containing international comparisons, the relationship between effectiveness and national testing

appears to be unpredictable, and there is no automatic, one-to-one correlation<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Natalie Mons (2009) *Theoretical and real effects of standardised assessment: background paper to the study National Testing of Pupils in Europe: Objectives, Organisation and Use of Results*. EACEA; Eurydice.

## **6. Introducing new standardised assessment**

6.1. In the light of the evidence cited above, there are a few key questions that need to be answered before a final decision is made to introduce new standardised assessments in Scotland for P1, P4, P7 and S3.

- Would the use of new standardised tests in aspects of reading, writing and maths as outlined in the Framework provide information of sufficient quality that teachers and schools could use it to improve learning and progress in literacy and numeracy across learning as defined in CfE?
- Would the testing preparation and process take up time in classrooms that could be better spent supporting and promoting learning in other ways? A testing process where every relevant pupil in every school will need to be tested will put a significant burden on the schools, especially in smaller authorities.
- Would scores provide a sufficiently accurate picture of school, teacher and pupil performance to justify their use as a basis for judgments about the quality of schools' provision and comparison amongst them?
- Overall, do the benefits of standardised testing outweigh the human and financial costs, for tax-payers, for teachers and especially for pupils?

6.2. In order to answer these questions, the introduction of standardised assessment for high-stakes purposes would obviously require simultaneous building of capacity in understanding of test development processes and interpreting, reporting and using data. Steps to be taken would include thorough and detailed piloting of tests, reviewing questions and marking processes for bias and fairness to different groups of pupils; and careful review of arrangements for administration, interpretation and publication of results. It would be important to ensure that sample sizes and characteristics used to develop the tests were sufficiently large and diverse to be representative of all Scotland's pupils. Including more performance-based items to better reflect the skills and attributes of literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing across learning in CfE, and to manage the role that language and word-choice plays in test performance, would also be important. None of this can be accomplished quickly: there are no short cuts to quality in this respect. The timescale for test development set out in the Framework is therefore quite unrealistic and should be challenged.

## 7. Alternative approaches to an Improvement Framework

- 7.1. Earlier in this paper (see 2.4) attention was drawn to Scotland's strong position in terms of the advice about evaluation and assessment policy development in *Synergies for Better Learning*. Rather than commission a new standardised assessment, which might introduce perverse incentives and have unintended negative consequences, policy-makers might be better advised to build on what has already been done, strengthening and adapt existing evaluation and assessment arrangements and building on the already considerable strengths of our education system.
- 7.2. In particular, the advice in *Synergies for Better Learning* refers to the integration of national evaluation and assessment frameworks. Between 2002-2007 the Scottish Government undertook a system-wide funded assessment development programme, *Assessment is for Learning*, whose explicit purposes were both to develop teachers' capacity in assessment to make their own dependable and consistent judgments about pupils' learning, to inform planning for next steps in learning; and to explore what a 'streamlined and coherent system of assessment' for Scottish schools might look like. In relation to the latter, in June 2005 the Government published Circular No. 02, Assessment and Reporting 3-14<sup>25</sup>.
- 7.3. Drawing on international research and practice at the time, The Circular was published in response to existing arrangements whereby the then Scottish Executive gathered information about levels of attainment from local authorities, who in turn had gathered it from their schools, based on the results of National Tests used when pupils were 'ready', to confirm teachers' judgments. It was generally recognized that this use of test results was putting pressure on teachers to focus on a narrow range of skills and 'get children through the tests' rather than making more considered assessment judgments across a range of concepts and skills, based on individuals' learning needs. The Circular related to the 5-14 curriculum then in place, but looked forward to the introduction of CfE; certainly the principles set out would apply equally well in 2015 as they did in 2005, and indeed closely anticipated the OECD's 2013 advice in *Synergies for Better Learning* about integrating evaluation and assessment.
- 7.4. In brief, the proposed framework for assessment was designed 'to provide all partners with sufficiently dependable information and feedback to inform judgments, choices and decisions about learning, and to inform planning for improvement'. The Circular emphasized that each of the various partners in education, including teachers, pupils, parents, local authorities, teacher educators, HM Inspectors and the Scottish Government, had an important role to play in the partnership, providing, sharing and using good quality assessment information for these purposes: as a continuous process in school classrooms, to understand and evaluate progress in learning of

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<sup>25</sup> Circular No. 02 June 2005: Assessment and Reporting 3-14, Scottish Executive Education Department. <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2005/06/2393450/34518>



individuals and groups of pupils locally in schools; and from time to time to summarise and report on progress and achievement in relation to published curriculum 'standards', for pupils and their parents and for schools and local authorities across Scotland.

- 7.5. The assessment framework would depend for its effectiveness on teachers' skills in evaluating classroom learning, which would depend in turn on support from teacher educators (for initial and continuing professional learning), school leaders, local authorities, inspectors and policy-makers, to include arrangements for local moderation and a bank of National Assessments, to promote a shared understanding of the outcomes and standards expected of children at different stages of progression. For schools and local authorities, the collection, summary and considered use of assessment information, shared in an open and collegiate way, would be essential parts of the process of identifying ways of improving learning and teaching and children's achievements. Finally, there would be standardised assessments in the form of a national monitoring survey each year, designed explicitly to provide accurate information about overall national standards and over-time trends in achievement.
- 7.6. On this last point, the Scottish Survey of Achievement (SSA), developed and managed in partnership amongst the Scottish Executive, Learning and Teaching Scotland, the Scottish Qualifications Authority and local authorities, took the form of a rolling programme designed to monitor the attainment of a representative sample of children in P3, P5, P7 and S2 on a broad range of content and cross-cutting 'core skills', in one of four aspects of the curriculum (English, Mathematics, Science and Social Subjects) each year – not unlike literacy, numeracy and health & wellbeing across learning in CfE - at P1, P4, P7 and S3<sup>26</sup>.
- 7.7. The survey was designed quite deliberately as 'low stakes', in order to avoid over-burdening schools or distorting classroom practice, with individual schools and pupils remaining anonymous. It would use nationally devised written and practical assessments which would be externally marked. Teachers nominated by local authorities would help to draft assessments and act as field officers and external assessors for the survey, with some training and external moderation of their judgments, as part of the monitoring arrangements, thus modelling for them approaches to assessment that closely matched published curriculum standards (levels), and providing the basis for a bank of fully verified and quality assured materials that could be used in schools as part of local moderation, and building professional capacity in assessment.
- 7.8. Two of the most distinctive features of the SSA were the availability of clear, interpretable levels of knowledge and skills development in and across the various curriculum areas, against which to report national levels of attainment; and the in-built

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<sup>26</sup> Reports for 2005-2009 can be found at <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education/TrendAchievement>

cross-stage facility to report on progression across the period P3 to S2. Sampling and reporting at local authority level in half of the authorities each year in 2006 and 2007 provided information about the achievement of their pupils that they could compare with national data and use as part of their improvement planning. These features were lost in 2010 with the change to the much more limited SSLN (but reports and materials from the SSA are available from Government and SQA archives).

- 7.9. As an alternative to commissioning a new standardised test, with all the associated challenges outlined earlier in this paper, a partnership team could be formed to revisit Circular 02/05, including the SSA as part of it, with a view to leading and managing the updating and adaption of the 2005 assessment framework to CfE and the identified requirements of the present Improvement Framework. This approach would also have the benefit of being more economical and quickly implemented, since it starts from existing processes, frameworks and materials.
- 7.10. A number of other recent assessment developments, in Scotland and elsewhere, could also be adapted for our purposes. Some examples are given below; there are many others. With regard to a range of approaches to assessment, for example, in 2001 a research team from Scotland piloted and evaluated an approach to 'baseline assessment' in P1, based on an early years curriculum-related observation schedule for use by staff in nurseries and schools<sup>27</sup>. Education Scotland has recently been providing advice about progression in different areas of CfE in the form of *Significant Aspects of Learning*. For school self-evaluation, a revised version of *How Good Is Our School* has been published in the past month.
- 7.11. Elsewhere, researchers in New Zealand and in Queensland and Australian Capital Territories in Australia, amongst others, have been exploring innovative approaches to the standardised assessment of progression in complex and practical skills of application and problem-solving across various learning areas, from early numeracy to different discipline areas at senior secondary level, including science and technology. A group of educators from Scotland visited Winnipeg in 2009, and explored the city's arrangements to collect data from start-of-session diagnostic interviews, designed to inform planning of provision for pupils in the coming year. Researchers in Israel have successfully piloted and evaluated practical high-stakes 'assessment centres' to select candidates for medical school. In respect of consistent marking of extended writing and practical tasks, SQA in Scotland have tried out computer-based 'Adaptive Comparative Judgments'<sup>28</sup> in the college sector as a means of improving consistency and reliability of judgments.
- 7.12. Many other examples could be mentioned; the point is that there is a great deal of

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<sup>27</sup> The report of that project is available at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09695940124706>.

<sup>28</sup> See article by Alastair Pollitt at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0969594X.2012.665354>

recent research, evidence and expertise readily available to build on for the future, much of which will be discussed at the Association for Educational Assessment – Europe annual conference in Glasgow in November. The conference will provide a good opportunity to review recent international activity and expertise in assessment and consider what and who could usefully contribute to continuing developments in Scotland.

## **8. Conclusion**

- 8.1 Over the past 20 years, Scotland has made quite remarkable progress in developing its education system, in ways which have been considered exemplary by other developed countries, and more successfully than might be expected given our size and resources. In particular, our approaches to assessment and self-evaluation, founded on partnership working and innovative approaches to change management, have been the focus of considerable interest from other countries. This is not to say that we can sit back and congratulate ourselves: like many countries, we have enduring and challenging problems around equity in education, and finding ways through lifelong learning of promoting social justice and mitigating the effects of poverty and deprivation on our most disadvantaged children.
- 8.2 As the First Minister points out in her introduction to the Improvement Framework, 'Excellent learning and teaching is key to raising attainment and closing the gap in attainment between those in our most and least deprived areas'. 'Excellent learning and teaching' involves teachers and pupils, in dialogue, understanding the curriculum and what progression looks like; and in a cycle of planning for learning and progression; establishing through assessment how much and how well pupils have learned and are learning; and planning further learning. Throughout the process, the learner is at the centre of all activity, each according to her/his needs and circumstances. Focusing our improvement efforts on promoting lifelong 21<sup>st</sup> century learning for all our children, starting from where we are using what we know about transformational change, could go some way to improving all our lives, but especially for those whose needs are greatest.