COMMISSION ON SCHOOL REFORM

Learning at home

March 2020

Membership of the Commission on School Reform is as follows:

- **Keir Bloomer (Chair)**: Education Consultant and former Director of Education
- **John Barnett:** Business consultant and former Parent Council Chairman
- **Helen Chambers:** Deputy Chief Executive of Inspiring Scotland
- **Jamie Cooke:** Head of RSA Scotland
- **Carole Ford:** Former Head teacher
- **Jim Goodall:** Former Head of Education and Community Services at Clackmannanshire Council and current Lib Dem councillor at East Dunbartonshire Council
- **Anna Hazel-Dunn:** Headteacher Royal High Primary
- **Frank Lennon:** Former Head of Dunblane High School
- **Cllr Paul McLennan:** SNP Councillor in East Lothian
- **Ross Martin:** Economic Agitator with experience in a variety of roles in education-including school teacher, voluntary tutor, chair of local education authority, member of college board & university court, Chair of a charity, and, most importantly, a parent and former student.
- **Lindsay Paterson:** Professor of education policy in the School of Social and Political Science at Edinburgh University
- **Lesley Sutherland:** Board member, the Centre for Scottish Public Policy

Please note that all members of the commission participate in an individual capacity and that the views of the commission do not represent the views of any other organisation to which the individual members belong.

When John Swinney made his recent announcement that schools would close, he pointed out, quite correctly, that this is the first time that our national system has been completely shut down and also the first time that the examinations will not take place. In the present emergency, it is difficult to see what other decision he could have made. Nevertheless, it has huge implications. Some of them need to be addressed urgently.

Parents are faced with a period of five months with no access to schools. They are naturally greatly concerned about the education of their children. Even more pressingly, they wonder how they will occupy them during what may be an extended period of social isolation. Helping their children's learning may well be part of the answer.

The problem is, of course, that many will have few ideas about how to go about this. Parents will be aware that there are many resources on the web but may be unsure of how to find them. Few will feel competent about evaluating their quality and making decisions about which to use. Furthermore, most children will still need help in understanding whatever appears on screen. Parents may often struggle to provide it.

In other words, there is the possibility for providing a great deal of support for learning at home – in a way that would have been quite unthinkable in even the recent past – but it has never been tried on a large scale and the necessary support mechanisms are not in place.

It is, of course, necessary to recognise that the kind of support that is needed depends on the age of the child and the nature of the subject. It is much easier to envisage effective parental support for home learning in the case of primary children. On the other hand many secondary pupils will be better able to organise help for themselves (possibly guided by their schools) and make use of online support.

An important issue is giving reassurance to parents and making them feel that they will be able to help their children. At the very least, they will want to be reassured that their efforts will not be counterproductive and set their children back. Effective reassurance requires advice that is recognised as authoritative. Surely there is a role here for Scotland's main education agency?

Education Scotland has a large and talented staff, including both the Inspectorate and the curriculum agency staff. There is a wealth of expertise in all curricular areas. Who better to identify good web sources and issue advice on their use? Of course this would be only a small part of the task of putting together the infrastructure to support home learning but it would be a reassuring and valued first step. Indeed, as a preliminary step, the Education Scotland website could indicate to parents what is intended. The government could give some publicity.

It might be objected that the agency has other work to undertake. However, in present circumstances, much of it will have ceased to be urgent. Even the task of preparing the Scottish Government's statement for the forthcoming review of Curriculum for Excellence falls into this category. The Commission on School Reform was delighted to welcome the review but, if it is somewhat delayed, that is of little lasting consequence in the midst of the current crisis.

A very worrying aspect of the school closure is the likely impact on equity. The parents of disadvantaged children are likely to feel less confident about helping their children's learning. However, most of them will have experience of reading to their children in early childhood and can perhaps be persuaded that what is now required is not much more difficult. Involving these parents is very important because there is good research evidence indicating that disadvantaged children's learning suffers disproportionately during extended periods without schooling, for example during the summer holidays. In other words unless poorer parents can be encouraged and enabled to help

their children, there is every likelihood that the attainment gap is about to widen.

It is unlikely that this can be completely prevented. However, there are steps that can be taken that would at least mitigate the effect. This is part of what I meant when referring earlier to 'necessary support mechanisms'. It seems likely that many educationally conscious and more affluent families will already have made arrangements for private tutoring conducted via Skype or Zoom rather than face-to-face. There will probably not be much of this going on in households in areas of deprivation. Yet it is there that the need is greatest.

Support can surely be made available through schools but many schools will not have the expertise available to put the mechanisms in place. Again, there is a large role for the national agencies. Advice is needed on how to set up support networks and to ensure that the technology is understood. The advice needs to take account of what can reasonably be regarded as possible for teachers.

The school system works on the basis of the economies of scale that are achieved when young people are assembled, generally in groups of 20 to 30, under the leadership of one teacher. Online support (including feedback on pupil work) has significant aspects of personalisation with time being spent with individuals. This may well be a beneficial direction for the system to take but it is not one for which it is prepared. Teachers can be expected to respond to individual pupils but not very often or for very long periods. They may also have to spend part of their available time helping parents to fill in the gaps.

However, it would be possible to use other skilled people to augment the support that teachers could provide. The government could set up an army of online tutors, recruited from retired teachers, undergraduate students, and others. They would probably have to be unpaid but there must be many people who would be keen to be of assistance. The role for Education Scotland and other agencies would be to provide them with the online advice - eg on using apps such as Skype or Zoom – and publicising the scheme.

That kind of assistance would not work for children without internet access from home, but a majority even of people in quite straitened circumstances now do have internet access: according to the 2016 Scottish Household Survey, 96% of all households with children have internet access, including 87% of households with children where the net annual income is less than £15k. So even most poor children could benefit. It would need active cooperation from parents, but mainly to set up the links and keep the children on task and then provide further support as indicated earlier.

This paper touches on only a small number of the implications of providing some kind of educational support in the current circumstances. Even so, it will be obvious that the complexities are enormous. Very little time was available between the time that the magnitude of the present risks became clear and the closure of the schools. Government cannot be blamed for not having a fully-formed plan in place. Now, however, is the time for rapid action.

Parents' guide to Curriculum for Excellence

For all pupils 3-18

Four Fundamental capacities

(aimed at helping pupils become):

- Successful learners
- Confident individuals
- Responsible citizens
- Effective contributors

Four contexts:

- Curriculum areas and subjects
- Interdisciplinary learning
- Ethos and life of the school
- Achievement

Curriculum levels

Broad General Education

Early = Age 3 to P1
First = P2-P4
Second = P5-P7
Third/ Fourth = S1-S3

Senior Phase

Fifth = S4-S6
Nationals 4s, National 5s
Highers, Advanced Highers

The senior phase is designed to build on the experiences & outcomes of the broad general education, and to allow young people to take qualifications and courses that suit their abilities & interests.

Curriculum areas

- Expressive arts
- Health and wellbeing
- Languages (including English, Gaidhlig, Gaelic learners and modern languages)
- Mathematics
- Religious and moral education
- Sciences
- Social studies
- Technologies.

Literacy, numeracy, and health and wellbeing are recognised as being particularly important.

If you are stuck for educationally useful things to do with your children, here are some ideas that are particularly relevant to primary-age children:

- **Get them to read.** It really doesn't matter what they read, provided it stretches their imagination and their vocabulary. Books, websites, magazines, newspapers: they can all boost children's command of language.
- **Get them to write.** Writing about everyday things is as effective as writing about school lessons. It could be writing about being at home from school. It could be about how people have reacted to the coronavirus. It could be about missing their friends, they could write to relatives in different households, especially elderly relatives who might have been isolated for several weeks now. Writing can be in the form of an email or a mini-essay.
- **Get them to count and to calculate.** There is a surprising amount of things in the everyday world that can be counted. Birds in the garden or on the roof tops. Cars passing (to see if the current restrictions are reducing traffic.) The family's consumption of food or other household items every week. The number of messages received on a phone as the time of isolation extends. The calculating and counting that are a necessary part of cooking.