

## *2026 Election Policy Insights: Education*

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Policy Insights by Professor Christopher Chapman  
and Professor Graham Donaldson

### **Rising to the challenge: Where now for Scottish education?**

#### Understanding the challenge

The Scottish Government claims to have made significant investments in Scottish education. For example, from the formal introduction of Curriculum for Excellence in 2010, to when the First Minister publicly declared they would eradicate the “poverty-related attainment gap” in 2015 with an investment of a billion pounds over the current parliament. In contrast to these claims others argue that resources have been shifted around the system, with little new investment and outcomes and impacts of these investments are equally contested.

This period has also involved numerous reviews by the OECD (e.g. [OECD 2015](#)), Scottish Government (e.g. [Governance Review 2017](#)) and independent experts (e.g. [Muir \(2022\)](#), [Withers \(2023\)](#) and [Hayward \(2023\)](#)), furthermore, the First Minister’s International Council of Education Advisers has produced a number of reports (e.g. [ICEA, 2023](#)). The response to the recommendations made by these reviews and reports, can be described at best, as variable.

The pandemic in 2020 has also had a significant impact, presenting new and unprecedented challenges to education provision, resulting in a legacy of wider harms to our children including delayed development, social, issues of emotional and wellbeing that are likely to play out over this generation and beyond.

Furthermore, the external environment is changing at a rapid pace. Technological advances including genAI, geopolitical fissures and the sustainability of the planet all present real, existential and unpredictable challenges. Meanwhile the Scottish education system maintains a predictable and conservative direction of travel that may have been fit for purpose in the industrial past of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As the late Sir Ken Robinson argues, we need a paradigm shift that drags education from a model fit for the industrial revolution into one that can meet the uncertain needs of an unpredictable future.

## Without purpose and values, reform leads nowhere

The essential starting point for educational success lies in having a clear, common purpose that is founded on shared values and is rooted in the reality of schools and classrooms.

A strong case can be made for the extent to which the early years of [Curriculum for Excellence](#) (CfE) and the [Scottish Attainment Challenge](#) (SAC) stood up well to these tests. Both represented the potential for radical change in thinking about the purpose and approach to education. Both captured, and in many cases commanded professional and political support, giving greater agency to schools to translate purpose into classroom reality and, excited international interest. However, while there appears to remain broad support for their principles, both remain very much unfinished business in terms of impact on schools and their pupils. As reforms CfE and SAC, suffer from what [Michael Barber \(2007\)](#) termed “*controversy without impact*”, when bold reforms lack high quality execution.

The hardest parts of any reform lie in remaining true to original purposes and sustaining momentum in the face of inevitable issues of implementation and of fresh political challenges. If the purposes underpinning reforms are not sufficiently embedded in professional and political cultures then, little by little, they can become diffuse or mutate into forms that fail to reflect original intention. The evolution of CfE and SAC tend to reflect such a process and that the starting point for any future progress should lie in a reaffirmation/reappraisal of purpose.

The context for such a reappraisal is very different from when CfE and SAC were conceived: globalisation is in retreat; the very existence of liberal democracy is being questioned; and sustainability in the face of a climate crisis has become paramount. Beliefs including reasoning and empiricism that can be traced back to the Scottish Enlightenment are being challenged in a 'post-truth' world. At the same time, the digital revolution is affecting how we live, work and relate and its implications for teaching and learning and for the wellbeing of our young people are becoming ever clearer. CfE's and SAC's approach to developing capacities in young people and focusing on equity and excellence may sit well with this uncertainty, but their form and elaboration demand fresh thinking.

## So, what might be done?

If the key to future success lies in determining and sustaining purpose based on strong values and a willingness to think creatively, what is needed to translate aspiration into reality?

Education policy has become an increasingly politicised and contested area. Ideology, vested interests, societal changes and economic constraints all create a complex mix within which schools and teachers work. The landscape is cluttered with multiple voices of trade unions, local government, national agencies, third sector organisations and other stakeholders vying for power and influence. All of this leaves the vision for education and the associated messaging at best confused, and at worst lacking a coherent meta-narrative that is inspiring, ambitious, and can meet the needs of future society.

We propose seven steps to create a more dynamic approach to policymaking that can bridge the gap with the classroom and thus the learning and wellbeing of young people. First, if we are to translate exciting possibilities into school reality, we need a collaborative approach to determining purpose and direction. This approach can build from the curriculum review cycle but needs to go further and faster. A reimagined Education Scotland should continue to be in the lead in providing the forum within which all the key stakeholders can engage with the very complex issues that surround curriculum purposes. The engagement strategy employed in the Hayward review of assessment and qualifications, enhanced through citizen

assembly approaches, could provide useful means of securing broad involvement and ownership of purpose. Digital communication opens possibilities for participation in ways that transcend traditional or superficial forms of 'consultation'.

Of course, ultimate responsibility for setting the direction and ensuring delivery must rest with the elected government of the day. However, good government can only benefit from a deliberative process that engages the hopes and the capacities of everyone with the interests of Scottish young people at heart. Enhanced participation in determining and pursuing purpose can provide Ministers with the advice and evidence they need to set expectations, secure resources, establish support and oversee progress.

Second, subsidiarity should be more entrenched in our educational culture. The closer decision-making is to the realities of the classroom, the more the focus will be on the needs of young people and the specifics of learning and teaching. The challenge for policy is to secure ownership of and commitment to overall, national purposes and to create the conditions that will facilitate, animate and inform their realisation in practice. Mechanisms that create easy access to innovative thinking in ways that can translate into classroom reality lie at the heart of embedding impactful reform. Not outside in but through collaboration and interaction. Reform becomes authoritative and persuasive when it is purpose-driven, co-owned and relates directly to the specifics of the daily lives of teachers and pupils.

All of this means a rethinking of the roles and responsibilities of local authorities. Some local authorities have demonstrated progress on this front. In Dundee for example, the local authority has become a catalyst for change, brokering and facilitating connections across the city, moving knowledge and expertise around the system to impact on classrooms and children they serve. Others, such as the eight local authorities within the West Partnership have demonstrated that through innovation, regional collaboration can offer a fruitful way forward. These arrangements suggest an alternative set of sub-system relationships such as 'local boards' may have the potential to generate economies of scale and enhanced professional learning driven from the ground up, led by teachers and school leaders for teachers and school leaders.

Third, meeting the challenges facing our schools today and going forward will require sure-footed leadership at all levels across the system. That means getting the right leadership in schools, local and national actors in the right places. Change does not happen solely through policy mandates or robust accountability. We need to invest in building leadership capacity that is rooted in shared values and knows how to build support for agreed purposes across different types of boundaries, contexts and professions to create a Networked Learning System; a system driven by evidence and collaborative inquiry. We also need to apply the subsidiarity principle in ways that respect differing levels of decision making, placing trust in the professionalism and capability of those in key leadership positions at all levels of the system.

Fourth, there needs to be an unrelenting focus on supporting the professional learning of teachers and other players who guide and support the learning and wellbeing of our young people. There can be no real change without the wholehearted support of the teaching profession and the wider educational community. Educators have a professional responsibility to act in the best interests of all children and young people. Balancing competing tensions can be a challenging tension for trade unions and professional associations. A teacher's job has always been challenging but the extent and nature of fresh demands require fresh thinking. Put simply, the quality of the education system reflects the quality of the workforce.

Fifth, we welcome [Scottish Government's](#) AI strategy launched last month. However, this needs to be connected more explicitly to education and schooling. Rigorous and imaginative thinking is required about how generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) can enhance learning and teaching while being realistic about its limitations and dangers. The world around our schools is being transformed by the digital revolution. Young people engage directly with this technology in most aspects of their lives. While caution is of course needed, we should not seek to insulate schools from its potential benefits. GenAI's role in easing aspects of teacher workload is clear but it also presents broader possibilities for enhancing learning and teaching. Its implications for young people to practise and reinforce their learning at a time and place of their own choosing look promising. Furthermore, GenAI also has the potential to provide more detailed diagnostic feedback to teachers and pupils about aspects of learning requiring further support. At its best, the judicious use of artificial

intelligence can create the space for more face-to-face contact between teachers and pupils. At its worst, it could lead to a depersonalised and isolated learning environment.

Sixth, Scotland needs to harness the potential of the university sector. This means reimagining how the universities intersect with policy and practice. We need to be much more effective at generating new ideas that match the opportunities and challenges in our schools and the changing needs of all our young people. To date, the contribution of Scottish universities to informing and supporting education policy and practice has been marginal. This untapped resource working together with the wider system could reshape how fresh thinking is generated, tested and implemented throughout the system. For example, if the recently established Centre for Teaching Excellence is to be impactful and sustainable it must generate the ideas and mobilise the expertise and energy to motivate the profession at pace.

And seventh, we need an approach to accountability that is authoritative, constructive and promotes improvement in ways that recognises the complexity of challenges facing our schools. This will require structures and processes that provide ongoing, formative evidence about the reality of our young people's school experience. A reformed and independent inspectorate is well placed to fulfil such a role. Its inspection programme should be designed to enhance understanding of emerging trends in performance and issues requiring attention in real time. But the inspectorate should also generate and deploy other forms of evidence to provide a more complete picture and broader commentary than can be gained from inspections alone. There is a case for the inspectorate to undertake various research and evaluation functions to provide an authoritative overview of the quality and progress made by Scottish education. In this way, the extent to which original purposes are continuing to drive decisions about practice can be monitored and adjustments made timeously.

## The challenge ahead

The impact of this argument about the way ahead for Scottish education will depend on fundamental changes in cultures and behaviours. If innate conservatism fuelled

by vested interests prevail then nothing will really change with the necessary urgency.

We are on the brink of dramatic developments which will inevitably require rapid, imaginative, and purposeful responses from the entire education system. Those in leadership positions with the influence and power to reimagine tomorrow's education system for today have a huge responsibility to be brave, creative and collaborative in setting a compelling agenda. Our young people cannot afford their school experience to be increasingly divorced from the realities of their lives now and in the future.

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## Policy Insights

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