

## **SPEAKING NOTE FOR CABINET SECRETARY'S ADDRESS TO SPTC CONFERENCE SATURDAY 7 NOVEMBER 2009**

Thank you for your introduction and thank you for inviting me to SPTC's 61<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference. I am delighted to see that SPTC continues to thrive at a time when we enter a critical phase in the delivery of our reforms to Scotland's educational system.

### **Vision**

Parents are a vital part of the future of Scottish education and so what I would like to do today is to share my vision for Scottish education with you and to look at how parents and schools can work together to help build a better future for all Scotland's young people.

Although I see the changes happening in Scottish education from the perspective of a Minister, I have another perspective. I am also a parent of three children, one at primary school and two at secondary school.

Just as we have a national health service from cradle to grave, we should also have a national educational system. A truly cradle to grave education system, from earliest years through to lifelong learning. A universal service, providing Scots with the knowledge and skills they need to perform in a future world constantly changing. To secure jobs yet to be invented and harness knowledge yet to be discovered.

As parents, I know you want to understand and feel confident that the best opportunities for your children are being provided. That your children are being provided with not just knowledge and content in their education but the skills to understand and use that knowledge and content not just to pass exams but for use in later life.

To bring this about, the Government has acted to deliver our ambitious plans for every part of the education system. From the Early Years Framework,

helping children get the best possible start in life, through to investment in training and skills for economic recovery. Giving young people More Chances, More Choices and supporting schools, colleges and universities.

Curriculum for Excellence and changes to the qualifications and assessment systems will help improve standards and prepare our children and young people for the challenges of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the global economy. I want more for our children from the Scottish education system than the education establishment has delivered over recent decades.

### **Curriculum for Excellence**

I see more and more teachers working together to learn from each other and to observe one another's practice and share ideas not just within their own school but learning from others to improve.

I visit schools week in week out across Scotland and see how Curriculum for Excellence is building on existing strengths but challenging teachers to raise standards in teaching and learning.

More and more schools are supporting teachers to look at learning and teaching and developing more within school opportunities for staff development.

I see pupils benefiting from a wider range of educational opportunity and challenge. It's about giving all our young people better chances in life and encouraging them

- To be successful learners. With enthusiasm and motivation to learn, openness to new ideas and determination to achieve
- To be confident individuals. With physical, mental and emotional well-being, self respect and ambition.

- To be responsible citizens. With respect for others and a commitment to participate responsibly in political, economic, social and cultural life
- To be effective contributors. With resilience and self-reliance, who can communicate, work with others, apply critical thinking, solve problems and be enterprising and creative.

Schools and Early Years Establishments across Scotland are developing these skills in their pupils and more and more pupils are being encouraged and given the opportunity to demonstrate initiative and leadership skills, for example, through support for younger children through the transition from primary into secondary schools.

I see schools working with families and their local communities to help deliver better chances for all children and young people - Community Learning and Development staff and other partner organisations are working closely with schools in a number of areas now. They are providing support for families whether it is in language or literacy support, support for Homework, support through difficult teenage years, managing behaviour, building confidence and very importantly support for families who are going through particularly difficult times.

## **Partnership**

This type of partnership working is central to planning and delivering Curriculum for Excellence. In this regard, my colleague, Keith Brown, Minister for Schools and Skills, on 28 October launched further materials to support schools.

Called Building the Curriculum 4: Skills for Learning, Life and Work, this document sets out the key messages about how children and young people can develop and apply skills as part of Curriculum for Excellence. It will help all those who are involved in planning and delivering young people's learning across all sectors and settings. A copy of the Skills Guidance has also just

been sent to all Parent Councils so that are aware of the information that schools will be sharing with parents.

I want to see all establishments working with partners, including parents, to develop a common understanding and language around skills and to plan and deliver learning and other experiences which meet the needs of individual children and young people.

I want to see a focus for all learning on literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. And I want to see all children and young people from early years to secondary and beyond treated as individuals. I want to see learning and teaching designed to match individual needs. As children move through the different stages of life and learning they should be supported in how they think, feel, mix with others and grow, helped to become more and more independent, cooperative and responsible, able to contribute in class, school and the wider community.

## **Changing world**

We live in a fast changing world where technology, travel, migration, advanced knowledge and the effects of industry and consumerism impact on the environment. The Government wants to ensure our children are provided with the knowledge and skills they need to perform in a future we don't yet know, to secure jobs yet to be invented and harness knowledge yet to be discovered. This is a drive to provide a universal education service, nurture our young people, teach our children how to learn, be adaptable and thrive.

Scotland has a worldwide reputation for the quality of its education system. I will strive to keep that reputation and these changes will secure the best chance for our children's future in a competitive global economy.

Curriculum for Excellence is about making teaching and learning relevant and is an opportunity, once again, for Scotland to lead the way in creative education.

## **Parental involvement**

However, schools themselves are not the whole picture. You as parents are also part of the picture and you all have a key role to play in your children's learning and development. We all know the difference that parents can make to children's learning and to the life and work of the school. Children spend only around 15% of their time in school. The bulk of their learning and development takes place at home and in the community. So your contribution is vital. It is important; therefore, that schools and parents work together to develop a shared understanding of what both can offer.

This is particularly true in the early years. Research tells us that playing, talking and reading are important because 75% of brain growth is completed during the first three years of life. Two-year-olds who are read to often and who do lots of things like painting and singing can talk more fluently and are better at problem solving. Children whose parents talk to them regularly have better language skills than those who do not

We have recently launched the new website - Play Talk Read which is designed to help parents and carers with their child's early development. The website is full of simple ideas and tips that are tailored to local areas and won't break the bank.

The parents' role is of course important at all stages of children's learning although the nature of this role will change. Whatever the stage of learning, parents can support Curriculum for Excellence. All parents can:

- Support and listen
- Celebrate success as well as challenge
- Help develop confidence
- Have fun
- Help prepare young people for life beyond school
- Discuss the future – the big picture

I believe all of these, and there are many more, can contribute to successful involvement of families in children's learning and better outcomes for children.

### **Parents as partners**

We in Government are committed to working with local authorities and schools to help further promote parental involvement. In last two years we have:

- held national parent conferences for parents and Parent Councils to discuss developments in learning
- run 'Making Partnership Work' events for parents, Parent Councils, teachers, staff and partners to share practice and learn more about how they can work together to make Curriculum for Excellence a success
- funded local projects to identify new and interesting practice in parental involvement. The results of these can be viewed in the parentzone website which we continue to develop as a key resource for parents and Parent Councils.

Across Scotland the picture that is emerging is one where parents and Parent Councils are supporting children's learning in schools and nurseries, and at home and in the community. We are seeing more examples now where:-

- parents are working alongside staff in schools and nurseries at the planning stage of learning to make it more relevant to the lives of children, young people and their families.
- Parent Councils are supporting improvement planning in schools, seeking views of their Parent Forum and feeding these back to influence changes and improvements. .

- Community Learning and Development staff are working with Parent Councils and schools to involve and support parents and families to benefit children.

I am pleased that the vital role that parents play in supporting their children's learning is being recognised by schools, by local authorities and nationally. Parents often say they want more information to help them understand what their child is learning and what they can do to help. They want information and reassurance about their children's progress.

There are now many events for parents being run by local authorities across the country that indicates to me how we are getting better at communicating and building better partnerships, sharing information, and involving parents in all aspects of education. We need to continue to develop these kind of partnerships and work with parents to get the best for all children and young people.

More and more, we are also seeing partnership working between schools and their Parent Councils. I am aware of good examples of Curriculum for Excellence in action in many schools across Scotland. Some of these, for example, literacy workshops, numeracy evenings, health events, are supported or led by the Parent Councils. Only last week Aberdeenshire ran a very successful conference for parents with a wide range of workshops both for and led by parents.

The contribution of parents is also helping schools to develop strong links and partnerships with local communities and businesses, supporting skills development and helping prepare young people for life beyond school.

## **Qualifications**

Of course the changes that we are seeing in teaching and learning need to be supported by qualifications and assessment systems that reflect Curriculum for Excellence. You will hear more about changes to the qualifications system

from Janet Brown later this morning. I will therefore only touch briefly on these to reassure you on any fears you may hold.

It is our intention that new qualifications will build on the strength of the existing system. The changes will benefit children and young people by bringing greater emphasis to developing their skills as well as their knowledge. They will help all children gain both knowledge and skills for learning, life and work by the time they leave school. And we are working with all the key players to make sure that Scottish Qualifications continue to have strong currency with employers, colleges and universities.

## **Assessment**

On assessment I recently announced a new strategy for Curriculum for Excellence which sets out the principles and purposes of assessment which will support learning from 3 years through to 18 years. Later in this school session I will be sending a copy of a Framework for Assessment to all teachers and practitioners. This will provide them with more detailed guidance on assessment for Curriculum for Excellence.

The new assessment system will raise standards and will help learners to show their achievements across a wider range of learning. The system will provide on-going feedback to teachers, parents and to children and young people, themselves, about how they can improve their learning. And we will ensure that they make appropriate progress in their learning

As a parent I am only too aware of the need for schools and parents to have a shared understanding of the changes happening over the coming period. It is essential that schools are confident in the messages that they give to parents.

At national level we are working with Learning and Teaching Scotland to develop a toolkit of materials to help schools and parents develop an understanding of Curriculum for Excellence and the various changes that are taking place

This work is in direct response to requests for increased communication with parents over Curriculum for Excellence. The work also follows on from the leaflet for parents, made available in March and the DVDs sent to Parent Councils and Head Teachers on Curriculum for Excellence and on Promoting Parental Partnership.

We are planning to distribute copies of the new toolkit to all Head Teachers at the start of next term. This will be supported by new information for parents to go on the parentzone website.

### **Parent Voice**

As I have indicated this is a time of change. And I firmly believe that you as parents should be part of this change and be fully involved in helping to shape and influence the development and delivery of change.

At the local level, the introduction of Parent Councils has given more and more parents the chance to make their voice heard. There are Parent Councils in 92% of local authority schools now. And they have enabled many new and many more people to become involved in the life of the school. This means we have seen a new enthusiasm for taking things forward. It is also encouraging to see that many Parent Councils across Scotland have developed new ways of working together, whether across different schools in cluster groups, or by way of a local authority-wide forum.

I am keen to see parents have a stronger voice at the national level also. That is why I was very pleased, that this year's National Parents' Conference, held in Glasgow in June, gave a positive welcome to my offer to help parents set up a new National Parent Forum.

This will help to give parents a voice at national level. It will also allow a two-way communication to develop with the local or regional forums of Parent Councils that we are beginning to see develop.

It is my strong view that the new National Forum should be genuinely parent-led and accountable to parents. I recognise that parents will need help at least in the initial stages to set this up. My officials, therefore, have been working with local authority contacts to help set up a first meeting of the forum to take place on 21 November in Glasgow. There has been a good response so far with representatives identified from 25 of the local authority areas across Scotland. I am looking forward to hearing about the discussions from that first meeting and considering how best we can continue to offer support.

I know, however, that not everyone can attend national meetings and I am keen that we offer other channels for parents' views to emerge. We are, therefore, looking at the development of a National Parents' GLOW Group which will allow for parents and Parent Councils across the country to be able to exchange ideas on parental involvement and to feed in their views on policy development. We will provide more information on this as it is developed over the coming school year.

### **Concluding remarks**

Before I conclude, I cannot let this occasion go past without some reference to the unparalleled work that Judith Gillespie has carried out many years for SPTC, and for parents across Scotland. I know that she will be retiring shortly and that this will be her last SPTC conference, certainly in her current guise as Development Manager. I say Development Manager, but I do not think that Judith's official title does justice to the service she has provided over the past 20 years or so, not just to SPTC, but to Scottish education and promoting the voice of parents in general. I was pleased to be in attendance when she recently received the Fellowship of the SQA.

Over many years Judith has spoken up for parents on many issues. One of the wonders of the web is that you can quickly research what people have said on different issues. A search on Judith takes you way back to the early nineties and before. It brings up the wide range of topics she has spoken on - cyber bullying, sexual health, exams, taking children out of school for holidays during term time, home education, obesity, disclosure, sport in schools, smacking, even on the influence of the X-factor – to name only a few.

I know that Judith has not always agreed over the years with governments and others in education and I and other parents haven't agreed with things she has said on our behalf but I know that her voice and that of SPTC has been heard and heeded at all levels of Government and beyond and has been influential across a broad range of policies. Her level of knowledge, expertise and opinion on such a wide range of issues has been valued by many over the years.

I know that the current Parental Involvement team in Schools Division, and Lorraine Sanda, the National Parental Involvement Coordinator, have particularly valued Judith's support and contribution over the past couple of years, as they have taken forward all aspects of the parental involvement agenda. As many of you will know, this has not been without challenges and disagreements, but Judith's perspective and views have been greatly appreciated.

Her support and that of SPTC have helped bring about the current parental involvement landscape with Parent Councils across Scotland. I am grateful for the support that Judith and her office team have provided to the new councils and I look forward to SPTC continuing this support into the future. I know that Judith and SPTC are keen to consider how they can support the new National Parent Forum. I think that all offers of support will be welcome to the new Forum and I look forward to see how this works out in the future.

I'd like to finish by wishing Judith all the best as she prepares to stand down from her current position. I am sure we will all still have the benefit of her views and expertise for some time to come.

Once again, thank you for inviting me to attend today's particularly memorable event and I wish you a successful conference.