

## **Education Reform Consultation**

### **James Gillespie's High School Parent Council**

#### **Introduction**

This is the response of the Parent Council of James Gillespie's High School ('JGHS Parent Council') to the Scottish Government consultation: *Education reform consultation on behalf of Professor Ken Muir, University of the West of Scotland and Independent Advisor to the Scottish Government* ('the consultation').

James Gillespie's High School is a large secondary school in Edinburgh with a current roll of 1540. As such it is the largest secondary school in the state sector Edinburgh and one of the largest secondaries in Scotland with a large number of pupils taking national qualifications each year. JGHS Parent Council is established under the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 and represents the Parent Forum of the school under section 5 of the Act.

JGHS Parent Council would like to make the following comments on the consultation itself and the way in which it has been carried out.

#### **General comments**

This is clearly an area of enormous interest to parents and pupils, both those currently within the secondary school system and those in younger years as any changes will have potentially significant effects on how children are educated and assessed in the future. JGHS Parent Council is therefore happy that the Scottish Government has taken steps to consult the public and different stakeholders within the education system to ascertain their views. However, it is our view that, given the scale and importance of the areas covered in the consultation, and their potentially widespread effects, the consultation process has been inadequate in its attempts to reach parents, to explain the meaning of what is proposed, and to provide opportunities for parents to properly engage in the process.

#### *Lack of adequate engagement*

Despite efforts by bodies such as Connect and the National Forum of Parent Councils (NFPC), communication about the existence of the consultation appears to have been patchy and it has been inadequately advertised. We consider that the best way to go about this would be for all parents and Parent Councils to have been alerted specifically about the publication of the consultation and about the importance of their engagement in the consultation process. Such an aim could have been easily achieved through established education authority communication routes, and we have seen national messages communicated in this way during the pandemic. A comprehensive approach like this would both have ensured that parents were properly informed that the consultation was taking place and underlined the significance of the consultation itself.

We also consider that the timescale over which the consultation was run was inadequate, as were specific efforts to provide further information on it and to gather feedback. The consultation was published on 30 September and will run until 26 November, covering only two months. There are approximately 700,000 children in the school system in Scotland currently and thus hundreds of thousands of parents whose views might have been sought, but this would be difficult to achieve over such a short period. There has been some limited

offer of online engagement through webinars; however, given the importance of the consultation, the range of issues it covers and the number of parents in the education system, it would have been better to offer local, targeted engagement events to ensure a range of views across different types of schools, and parents from all backgrounds. Running such a programme over a longer period would have promoted higher levels of engagement, as well as giving greater opportunities for issues to be debated within school communities.

### *Accessibility*

It is recognised that a certain amount of technical language is necessary to describe a complex area such as education. However, we consider that the level of ‘jargon’ in the consultation documentation and the way it is set out make proper engagement with it extremely difficult.

The consultation itself is set out in such a way that reading and understanding OECD reports as well as background papers on the roles of the SQA and Education Scotland, and on the functioning of Curriculum for Excellence, is a pre-requisite to answering the questions set. Even parents and parents’ organisations who have a general level of familiarity with the education system and education bodies have found that the levels of expertise required to understand the consultation and formulate views on it are high. This is a significant barrier to engagement for all, and one which will be all the greater for those who are not familiar with the system and its jargon, do not habitually engage with education consultations or Parent Council processes, are short of time, or do not have English as a first language.

These problems could have been mitigated by providing some sort of focus or summary of the contents of the OECD report and an appropriately worded consultation paper which set out the options clearly in a way that are more easily grasped by those who are not immersed in the system in the way the writers of these reports are. In addition, a more ambitious programme of engagement events as set out above could also have provided an opportunity to explain the proposals in an accessible way and to allow as many parents as possible to express their views.

### *Future proposals*

For all the reasons set out above, we hope that any specific proposals coming out of this consultation process will themselves be consulted on, that the proposals will be set out in a way which is accessible to parents, that parents will be given adequate notification of the consultation process, and that proper engagement will be prioritised to ensure as wide a set of responses as possible is achieved.

Any changes to a national education system should seek to have broad-based support across society generally and amongst those most affected by the changes specifically. This clearly includes parents, who have a wealth of experience in how education delivery and assessment actually function in practice, and a keen interest in ensuring that any changes to the current system operate as well as possible. Allowing parents to properly participate in this important debate is essential and should be central to the whole process.

### **Parents’ comments on secondary education system**

For the reasons set out above, and to promote participation in the consultation, JGHS Parent Council asked parents to submit comments on the question below:

*What would you like Scotland’s secondary education assessment system to look like in the future?*

These are the responses we received:

<p>I absolutely think it should be all open book or access to materials throughout as I feel the pressure and memory are factors which do not need to be solely based on. If you have a poor memory or can't retain a lot of information then you are instantly downgraded in exams.</p>
<p>Ongoing Assessment</p>
<p>Assessment with some exams.</p> <p>Regular feedback on assessments with the opportunity to drop lower grades and replace with better grades awarded for new assessments if progression shown.</p> <p>Pupil-focussed approach - the opportunity for individual pupils to choose to give more weight to exams or more weight to assessments which would fit with the aims of CfE.</p> <p>Cross-department sharing/checking of assessment marking to help mitigate against the influence of any difficult teacher-pupil relationships.</p> <p>External overview of exam papers and assessment exercises to ensure standardised across schools - the last two years have been very unfair on pupils with schools following their own, often very different, interpretations of the guidelines.</p> <p>Ensuring the SQA is not replaced with a newly named body but staffed/led by the same people who staffed/led the SQA - they did not perform well under the stress of the pandemic and have not shown the vision which is now needed.</p> <p>Much more openness and transparency about decision-making across education in Scotland; more involvement of pupils and parents in decision-making. Current system is hierarchical, unclear and remote for parents and pupils. This consultation is an example of that - it is impossible for most parents and pupils to engage meaningfully with what has been presented to us.</p>
<p>It should be more inclusive as kids don't fit in boxes and neurodiverse children aren't supported properly. Many neurodiverse kids are capable of achieving excellent results however the system isn't set up to give them the same opportunities. This is mostly due to a lack of funding and appropriate training.</p>
<p>Rewarding confident application of knowledge and demonstrable understanding.</p> <p>Rewarding insight and personal connection to subject matter. Rewarding open-mindedness and the ability to appreciate multiple perspectives. Rewarding the core concepts of CfE - citizenship and responsibility.</p> <p>If exams are going to continue then tests need to be a more regular part of school life.</p> <p>The system for feeding back on coursework should be standardised and improved so that process is more transparent and equitable.</p> <p>Private schools should not be allowed to set easier exams</p> <p>The system should match the university entrance requirements more readily (eg: UoG do not use UCAS points and do not list NPAs in requirements)</p>

I do have a concern that I read so many books at school; studied Shakespeare, Chaucer, Moliere, Dickens, Austen as well as modern classics like Salinger, Greene & Morrison and some contemporary fiction (not enough) but my daughter seems to have read almost nothing during her time at school. Is that the new way to do things?

I would like to see less emphasis on memorising a syllabus or honing an answer several times to win points, more emphasis on a love of learning and curiosity measured by the quality of a child's understanding and application.

I would like the formal end of year exams to continue as they have in previous years. For sciences the exam accounts for 80% of the mark and the project accounts for 20%. English, the folio pieces and the exam. I'm not sure how other subjects were broken down. I know that some people say that some children get exam anxiety and I'm sure that this is the case but this would only account for a tiny fraction of pupils. A good way to combat this is to provide more opportunities for exam practice. I know that some schools have end of year exams starting from S1 which gives the pupils ample time for the exam experience. I've also heard the argument that only students who have a good memory can perform well in exams. Undertaking regular unit tests, which do take place at JGHS, should pick up those students who are not progressing and more importantly that these are addressed. Most people can't memorise a whole year's worth of work for an end of year exam so that argument to me makes virtually no sense! Finally, if we want to ensure students get the best possible opportunity for a good exam outcome then we should be ensuring that they are taught effective study techniques.

Quarterly assessments rather than one exam. SQA still decides on the exams and monitors.

Stable system. Emphasis on problem solving and creativity, not rote learning. Tests all open book and not time constrained.

A mixture of continuous assessment, assessed project work and problem solving/ formal assessment questions

A fair and balanced system combining continuous assessments and exams, keeping the broadest curriculum available to maximise choice through to S6.

I would like the system to take into account the fact that not all children respond well to exams. Some have very good memories and are able to retain a lot of information from the curriculum and regurgitate it on the day of the exam, but others perform better in ongoing and open book assessments. Exams are an outdated method of assessing children's abilities. Not all children will go to university and other forms of after school education should be held in similar esteem to university.

These are very brief and general comments as I haven't had time to look at the consultation report. A summary of what is contained in any consultation would be very useful.

I hope that any changes to the system are not rushed through, but considered really carefully.

The current assessment system has its pros and cons, but on the whole it works quite well in determining which pupils will do well at selected subjects at university. If the curriculum and assessment system is to be changed, it would have to be done in close collaboration with universities.

Pros of the current system include:

- Consistency throughout the country and across all schools.
- Removing the workload of assessment from the school teachers, and allowing them to teach rather than also being involved in the assessment process.
- Providing opportunity for all pupils to excel – studies in England have demonstrated that using teacher assessment increases the attainment gap between socially deprived and better off schools.

The most important point is that moving to a teacher assessed system would bring in an element of subjectivity. Teachers at more affluent and / or independent schools are more likely to have high expectations of their pupils and predict higher grades. Success in exams can make a big difference in promoting social mobility, and in allowing young people from deprived backgrounds to get into universities.

Problems with the current system include:

- The amount of stress placed on young people around exam time. This can have a serious and long-lasting impact on mental health. The all-or-nothing approach seems quite out-dated and something that universities seem to have successfully moved on from.
- The failure to properly recognise the behaviour, effort and social responsibility of young people, who may have a lot to offer but are less academic.

In the USA a high school grade is partly based upon effort and behaviour, with universities running their own admission processes separately. While this wouldn't be suitable for our system, there should be scope to add some sort of official certificated grade for pupils who have met certain criteria in terms of: behaviour, helpfulness around school, teamwork, and social responsibility. For most employers, these are very valuable qualities.

Re curriculum changes – there are certainly subjects where the curriculum needs amendment (e.g. the English curriculum where the reading material is still apparently dominated by white male writers; or Food and Health which fails to cover essential pieces of information about female health.) I would think however, that this should be an ongoing process and needs to happen at a very detailed level for each subject.

Currently, I think far too much emphasis is placed on the exams. While being an effective tool for comparing pupils across the country, it is limited by the fact that it measures a pupil's performance based on one moment in time - the two hours that they are sitting the exam. Moreover, so much of the teaching is directed specifically to the exam and the pupil's ability to regurgitate formulaic answers. As someone who works in Higher

Education, the result is that students enter university without the requisite critical thinking skills. The emphasis placed on the requirement to memorise facts and quotations, rather than understanding processes and developing analytical thinking seems antiquated at best, and foolhardy at worst.

I would like assessment to be more continuous and less focused on memorising and regurgitating facts. By the time candidates get to the end of S4 they should have a portfolio of evidence that shows their skills and depth of knowledge which could be confirmed by exams although I am not wedded to having exams at all.

Thinking about student destinations assessments should reflect the needs of employers and society. Education and the assessments which are part of it should reflect the skills do we need young people to have- interpersonal, data and digital, knowledge etc.

I feel Government, schools, qualifications authority and school inspectorate should be separate independent bodies to allow proper objective monitoring of outcomes on educational policy.

I think a mix of course work assessment and final examinations should feature in assessment of pupils learning.

With fairness in mind, course work assessments should be set and independently assessed by the examining body rather than individual schools.

I don't feel politicians of any persuasion should have a role in the manipulation of exam format or of results and think our results should be open to scrutiny and comparison at an international level.

I understand we have no data amassed prior to curriculum for excellence which can't be helped now, but should be collecting objective data yearly to understand which policies succeed in Scotland.

Currently, pupils in rural or disadvantaged areas are denied the opportunity to keep a broad range of subjects at national 5. Obviously this policy continues to widen the attainment gap.

The solution to this is to give teachers the support they need to offer every opportunity possible to the pupils wishing to retain breadth at national 5, not to reduce the opportunities for all pupils.

Scotland needs to compete on a global scale and currently as a result of the above limitations, denies most pupils in the country the chance to obtain a qualification in a foreign language.

I think we have splendid art literature and culture in Scotland and applaud inclusion of this in the curriculum and assessment system. I do feel however that we could widen the view of curriculum for excellence to go beyond our border more, including the study and understanding of more texts drawn from other nations and cultures.

Like England's so parity. Highers over two years - like A levels - for uni education in the uk. Deeper knowledge. More trust, transparency. Earlier assessments so you know where your child actually is in s1/s2/s3.

Maximum of two sets of state exams - S4 and S6. Much greater value placed on vocational training rather than a presumption that more and more young people going to university is, by default, a good thing.

I feel strongly that there should be mandatory national testing at S4 and S5/S6. In addition, ongoing regular teacher assessments (formative, interim and summative) should take place at more regular intervals from S1, with proper, structured, regular feedback pathways to enable parents to know exactly when assessments are taking place, where their young person stands educationally in all chosen subjects and where the focus should be in terms of support. A combination of regular internal assessments plus external national assessments in my view vital to set targets for young people and to allow them to get used to exams in a supportive environment, i.e. to prepare them for university and beyond.

I did Highers, O Grades and Standard Grades in the 1980's, focused on end of year exams. To this day I still use skills learned at school. These include being given an information dump from a customer/colleague/boss and needing to extract the salient points, ie written and oral comprehension and how to take notes. I learned how to plan and manage my time leading up to multiple deadlines. Revising also included learning self care, optimal amount of study time and when to take a break. I learned to prepare for and perform under pressure. For example an exam isn't so different to running an event, where what happens on the day for a few hours really matters. Over 30 years later I still use mind maps that I first found invaluable for exams. When I set a target at work I record progress towards that and document it, similar to ongoing assessment. Every month I review and reconcile the accounts to check I got them right, not just moving on oblivious to mistakes. I feel that exam led schooling gave me a start in work life skills.

It concerns me that Scotland is considering the end of formal standardised assessment. In primary school my now S3 never got formal structured feedback on his progress. Due to covid he lost half of S1/2 and is now into Nat5s. His study skills – how to take notes, how to manage time, how to assemble information in an easy to recall format – are poor. For me the solution to this is to introduce assessment and explicit study skills earlier in school, not to get rid of them altogether. If we tell children at school that attainment doesn't matter, they may find their employment options limited in later life.

I am a parent who takes an active interest in my children's education and I have engaged with Scottish government and education scotland on parental engagement. I feel really frustrated with the consultation in education reform. I don't understand the questions, the supporting documents or the process. It's far too long. As a parent you want to hear my views but I don't believe this get parents views unless they understand what they are commenting on. It's academic policy jargon.

There is so much that needs to be done to support our children and this process is not helping our learners or the teachers.