

Report on The National Parent Forum of Scotland's Annual Conference for parents/carers, 6 October 2012

On 6 October, Bishopbriggs Academy hosted to our third annual conference which took as its theme 'Aiming Higher'. It was a lively, inspiring event with a packed agenda for parents: seven seminar choices, speakers from the world of education who were reassuring, honest and challenging in equal measure, activities for children from the Glasgow Science Centre and the Scottish Book Trust and much, much more.

Keynote speaker Dr Janet Brown, Chief Executive of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), opened the conference by describing Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) as "a generational event" which would make "our learners ready for the 21st century", with partners all working together to "enable our children to learn how to learn". She stated that the SQA's role has been to develop qualifications which "suit individual learners and their pathways in the future", that are "fit for purpose" and that are quality assured.

Alongside opportunities for parents to hear from high level speakers sharing their clear aspirations for CfE and their determination to deliver for children and young people, conference goers were also able to find inspiration in the work of schools. The seminar led by Doon Academy S1 pupils, 'The Pterodactyls', who recently won the Scottish Literacy Award, was a particular highlight. The pupils spoke movingly of their experiences on an intensive 10 week literacy support programme, describing how their literacy skills had improved dramatically and had changed their outlook on their learning: "I've changed over the ten weeks. At first, I thought there was no point, I wouldn't understand anything. But then it got easier and I got more confidence".

A creative approach to learning methods and a total focus on the needs and responses of the children were key to the success of this transformational programme which used multi sensory and active learning approaches, was reflective and, most importantly, was fun and empowering for the young people involved.

Parents and carers had the chance throughout the day to ask thought-provoking questions and to share their views. A key concern remained the challenge of successfully implementing Curriculum for Excellence in a time of severe cuts to local authority and Scottish Government budgets. This latter point was addressed head-on by the panel at the concluding question and answer session. Alan Johnston, Deputy Director of the Scottish Government Learning Directorate said:

"Local authorities will be consulting over coming months on where budget reductions should be made. Pressure on budgets is not something that will go away - this is a long-term issue. We

have to do all we can to make sure Curriculum for Excellence achieves the aspirations we have for it, against that economic and financial backdrop."

Ken Muir of Education Scotland noted that Education Scotland has a role in reporting to Scottish Government if any cuts are impacting on Curriculum for Excellence.

Chair of the National Parent Forum, Iain Ellis, said that working in partnership has never been more important and that ensuring the parent voice is heard is crucial. He reiterated this in response to a question about the confusion some parents still feel about Curriculum for Excellence:

"There is lots of information out there, but I would urge you to talk to your school. We all need to get into a proper relationship and partnership with our schools. Talk to your head teacher; talk to your teachers. Ask them your questions. Look at it locally. It is all about communication."

In the true spirit of challenge and improvement, of 'aiming higher', another parent asked the panel: "We have heard a lot about the merits of Curriculum for Excellence but can you tell us what you think are the flaws of Curriculum for Excellence?"

Education Scotland's Ken Muir felt that the principles of Curriculum for Excellence were still absolutely right and that "Curriculum for Excellence is a Scottish education system for the next generation". However, he thought that communicating around Curriculum for Excellence had not been as strong as it should have been: "You need to make sure from the outset that all stakeholders have a very clear idea of why you're making the change. You need to share the vision. We could have done better at communicating the thinking behind Curriculum for Excellence at a much earlier stage. I think there was also a procedural failing in that we left it to schools and authorities too much about how and when they might take forward implementation. As a result we have huge variation across Scotland, particularly in terms of the Broad General Education".

Parents found this honesty and openness very welcome. Karen Gilchrist from Carnbroe Primary School and Coatbridge High School and fellow parent Margaret McEwan shared their learning from the day:

Karen said: "I've really enjoyed the day. I found it helpful to find out from the Scottish Qualifications Authority about the transition to the new qualifications. We have been able to hear about the new qualifications in much more detail which was very informative. I also like the fact that the learning levels are not based on the school year but on a child's ability."

Margaret also found the day very worthwhile: “It has been very interesting. Ken Muir of Education Scotland’s seminar talk was really informative. He spoke of greater variation within an individual school than across the country in implementation of Curriculum for Excellence. He also said that inspection evidence over recent years pointed to some schools coasting and needing to improve the provision for all pupils. He talked about the challenge we all face: the world our children are living in is changing four times faster than our schools”.

Tina Woolnough, Communications Officer, National Parent Forum of Scotland