

*Evidence to the Education and Culture Committee*

*Curriculum for Excellence: National Qualifications*

*October 2014*

**Introduction**
1.1 The National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFS) welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence for the Committee’s inquiry into the implementation of the new National Qualifications.

NPFS has been working closely with parents and other partners to help support the introduction of the new qualifications, and has been listening to and representing the views of parents on the progress that has been made. We have contributed to a range of national working groups including the Tackling Bureaucracy group, the Curriculum for Excellence Management Board and held our own Assessment Working group. We also participated in leadership events to help agencies, schools and local authorities understand the needs of parents.

We believe it is essential that parents’ views and experiences are taken into account as part of this inquiry, and are submitting this evidence as we note that no organisations representing parents have been invited to give oral evidence. As NPFS represents the largest number of stakeholders in Scottish education, parents, we are disappointed not to have been invited to participate. It was also unfortunate that parents’ and pupils’ experiences were not discussed in any depth at the Committee’s evidence session on 30th September.

1.2 This evidence is based on the views of parents. NPFS held a focus group on 4th June 2014 to explore parents’ experiences of S4 in 2013-14, and to identify areas for improvement for the next year of pupils sitting National 4s and National 5s. In addition to the focus group, a number of parents submitted written submissions on their experiences. We also gathered parents’ views through engaging with parents in local areas, quarterly forum meetings, at the annual conference and other local area events held in North Lanarkshire, West Dunbartonshire, West Lothian and other areas. All this feedback has been incorporated into the findings presented here.

**Summary of parents’ views**

The key points raised by parents were:

2.1. Pupils studying for several National 5s felt that their workload was overwhelming, and that there had been a rush to complete all the units. Parents commented that the workload was “*relentless – 2, 3, 4 hours’ work each night just to keep up*” and that *“There is a mountain of content in some subjects”.*

This was exacerbated in some instances by inadequate planning for children completing Assessments and preparing for National 5 while also sitting National 4 Added Value Units. In contrast, parents of some National 4 pupils felt that their children had “*not been pushed*”.

The internal assessment situation in National 4 and National 5 was confusing for parents and pupils and raised questions over consistency of assessment.

2.2. There appeared to be a particular problem with streaming, as it was felt that some schools or teachers started streaming too early. In some instances this led to a feeling of divisiveness in mixed classes. Examples were given of teachers ignoring those taking National 4 in a mixed class while addressing the needs of those taking National 5s. One example was given of a teacher threatening a pupil with the punishment of being “*moved down to doing only a National 3”*, in front of National 3 pupils. However there were also positive examples of teacher communication, with one parent describing how a teacher had helped pupils to push themselves with the result that the whole class decided to opt into National 5s.

Parents commented that there seemed to be a perception that National 4s were not as highly regarded as National 5s:

*“Kids had the view that ‘I am a National 4 so I don’t have to bother’.”*

There was a clear issue that starting the qualifications early, i.e. at the end of S2, is not only confusing for parents, but can create an unlevel playing field for pupils.

2.3. Parents felt that positive communication by schools and teachers about Curriculum for Excellence and the new qualifications is key. Parents had been significantly reassured when they had received good communication from their school and teachers. There were good examples of clear and helpful monthly progress reports showing the extent to which each pupil was “on track”. However other parents felt that some teachers had hindered learning by appearing frantic themselves or where they showed that they themselves “*didn’t buy in to Curriculum for Excellence and the new exams*” and had been explicit about this in their dealings with parents and pupils.

2.4. Parents felt that a clear rationale for prelims was lacking. Some parents felt that prelims are valuable as a practice for exams, but that they did not serve a wider purpose. As a result, some parents felt prelims were unnecessary and should not be taken in their school.

2.5. A wide range of different subject models seemed to be emerging, with schools offering 7, 8 or 9 subjects in S4. This variation can created confusion for parents and pupils as different schools within the same local area were offering different subject models.

Overall, the view from parents was that schools were taking very different approaches and that there were few signs of convergence around a preferred model. Some schools seemed to be organised and confident, which gave reassurance to parents and pupils, while others seemed on the back foot with stressed and unsure teachers failing to provide reassurance or credible information.

**Recommendations**

3.1 Going forward, NPFS believes that there should be an expectation that teachers should help parents and pupils to understand and appreciate the benefits of Curriculum for Excellence and the new exams. To support this, SQA could provide a clear statement on what pupils gain from the new qualifications. Otherwise, there is a danger that the old qualifications will be regarded as superior. For example, the SQA statement could include a comparison table spelling out the difference in content and assessment between the old and new qualifications.

NPFS produces our own information to help parents understand Curriculum for Excellence. For instance, our series of Nationals in a Nutshell leaflets for each subject were very well received by both parents and teachers, and we have built on this success by developing Highers in a Nutshell for each of the new Higher subjects. However our work should not be seen as a substitute for proper engagement between schools and parents, and national agencies need to give a particular focus to developing parent-friendly information.

3.2. National 4s should not be regarded as an inferior option to National 5s and teachers should be careful not to convey this impression, particularly in the case of mixed classes where some pupils are sitting National 4s and others are taking National 5s. The decision about the level at which to present a pupil should be taken in a transparent and consistent way. Teachers should have the skills and confidence to support National 4 and National 5 pupils equally without creating obvious divisions. Moreover, internal assessment in National 4 courses and National 5 units should be reviewed as a priority.

3.3. Schools need to ensure that there is continuity of subject availability between S3 and S4, and if this is not possible then subject choices in S3 should made in the knowledge of this. Similarly, when schools are making a decision about how many subjects are offered in S4, this needs to be done in close consultation with parents and with the full implications being clearly described. In addition, the communication between subjects in schools needs to be improved so that periods of high pressure delivery do not coincide.

3.4. There is a need to explain the purpose of prelims to both parents and pupils. For example, guidance on this would help parents understand that it is up to schools to decide whether they are running prelims or not. The rationale for prelims should be much clearer and more convincing - or they should not be run. If they are found to be helpful and a decision is taken to run them, then the scope to build them into the assessment pattern should be explored.

3.5. To conclude, NPFS believes that in order to provide a better learning and teaching experience for our children, Scottish Government and Education Scotland must take parents’ views on board to ensure that pupils in the next cohort of Nationals are not subject to unmanageable workloads, uncertainty and unequal treatment. Young people deserve a positive environment in which to undertake this important stage of learning, and it is vital that all parties are on board and are presenting a consistent, positive message about the new qualifications and Curriculum for Excellence generally.

Where schools explain their rationale clearly and effectively to parents, there is usually little resistance. Resistance does not come from ‘difficult’ parents, but from a failure to properly engage. For example, our understanding is that few schools have consulted parents on the change from the old Highers to the new Curriculum for Excellence Highers.

The vision for Curriculum for Excellence is about individually tailored and interdisciplinary learning, with the focus being on the young person’s journey through education rather than a narrow emphasis on exam attainment. It is important that we keep this goal in sight and ensure that parents and young people are on board with this vision, as only then will people stop focusing on exam results. Crucially, more has to be done to listen to young people, and as such we have asked the Cabinet Secretary to ensure there is a mechanism for young people to participate in the Curriculum for Excellence Management Board.

*For more information, contact Barbara Schuler, Policy Manager*

*policymanager@npfs.org.uk*