



# the National Parent Forum of Scotland

## **Evidence to the Education and Culture Committee Education (Scotland) Bill 2015 November 2015**

1. The National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFS) has a considerable interest in the proposed amendments to the Bill in relation to the National Improvement Framework (NIF), as parental involvement is one of the five baskets in the Framework, and NPFS was cited in the Scottish Government's letter to the Committee on 18 September 2015 as a conduit for communicating with parents regarding the Framework.
2. In terms of evidence-gathering to inform our policy work, NPFS convened a roundtable of organisations involved in working with and on behalf of parents, which has met twice - on the 14<sup>th</sup> September and 26<sup>th</sup> October. This group has agreed to provide feedback to Scottish Government to improve and strengthen the 'parent basket in the NIF. We have also undertaken consultation with parents through focus groups and other engagement events.

Should the Framework be placed in law?

3. The Scottish Government's argument is that placing the Framework in statute will require education authorities to deliver against the priorities, and will help ensure that there is a consistent approach to this. Furthermore, Scottish Government claims that legislating on the Framework will help improve accountability will help ensure that reports are produced in a consistent and comparable manner. NPFS supports these arguments, as they seem reasonable.
4. The policy intention underpinning the Framework is that, by providing information that will help measure progress and inform the improvement progress, the Framework will help achieve two aims: raising attainment overall and closing the gap correlated with socio-economic disadvantage. The Scottish Government's viewpoint is that the Framework will help raise standards more quickly. However, the roundtable discussions held by ourselves and others<sup>1</sup> have flagged up a number of questions about whether these proposals will help achieve the stated policy aim. Below, we provide a summary of the issues and questions which were raised at the roundtable discussion events.

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<sup>1</sup> Children in Scotland roundtable discussion on the NIF, held on 27<sup>th</sup> October

## Parent 'basket'

5. Concerns have been raised regarding the expected level of parental involvement as described in the draft Framework. At present there is considerable variation across the country with regards to the quality of parental involvement and how information is shared with parents. NPFS is happy that parental involvement has its own basket and that we are being given the opportunity to contribute to what this will look like. Parents are looking for more details on how this will be achieved, and how they will be kept informed. Particular consideration needs to be given to parents who face barriers to involvement.

## Impact on children and young people

6. Under the proposals, some secondary school pupils will be tested every year. There is a risk that new tests will place additional pressure on young people, and this is particularly the case for pupils attending schools which are not following the guidelines on the Broad General Education.
7. The Framework contains little mention of how it will impact on children with additional support needs, and their parents. The prospect of testing is likely to create additional worry for parents of children with ASN. The only reference in the Framework to ASN is to children with complex additional needs, but ASN covers a far broader range of needs than this. Children with ASN should not be disadvantaged by a test that does not meet their needs.

## Early years

8. There is an absence of detail with regards to early years education/provision in Framework of not only when but how the measures will be implemented – particularly in relation to how parents of children in early years settings will be informed and involved.

## Closing the gap

9. Scottish Government has stated that the overall policy aim is to raise attainment and close the gap associated with socio-economic disadvantage by providing information that will help progress be tracked and monitored, which will in turn inform the improvement process. Consideration needs to be given as to whether it is likely that this policy intention will be achieved by the NIF proposals. Standardised tests can only confirm what the situation is, but do not in and of themselves provide any solutions to the problem of closing the attainment gap. Children arrive at school with disadvantages already in place in terms of their cognitive development and language ability. For example, one study suggests that by the age of three, children from

deprived backgrounds are already 9 months behind average cognitive development and 'school readiness' levels (Save the Children Scotland, Child Poverty in Scotland: The Facts, 2013).

10. For this reason, we have concerns in relation to when and how the standardised assessments will take place, and would like further detail on whether the results will be used at the school level to gain an understanding of individual pupils' strengths and weaknesses. This information should then form part of the dialogue between schools, parents and pupils in relation to the child's learning, and be used to support the child's progress.
11. There is a disconnect between the legislation on closing the gap and the reality on the ground in relation to school budget cuts, which have an adverse impact on the measures which have been shown to make a difference to pupils' attainment e.g. classroom assistants, English as an Additional Language support.

### **NPFS position**

12. NPFS supports the view that a coherent, consistent national approach to testing would help resolve the current situation whereby local authorities are buying in a range of tests which are not tailored to Curriculum for Excellence.
13. As much as possible should be done to ensure that teacher judgement is retained and valued and that the focus is on supporting individual children's learning rather than creating unfair comparisons between local authorities and between schools.
14. NPFS' research with parents (focus group, report available on request) found that parents would like to see wider achievement included in the definition of attainment. Attainment should encompass a whole child approach: that is, there is a need to recognise the strengths and aptitudes and interests of each child in the round and provide experiences that help them identify opportunities to take these forward (e.g. FE/HE, work experience, volunteering opportunities and outdoor experiences).
15. What matters to parents is how their own child is progressing, and how they can support their learning. Testing is best used to support the individual child's learning, and the results should form part of the dialogue between schools, parents and pupils in relation to children's progress.
16. In order for this dialogue to be successful, greater support (with appropriate levels of funding) needs to be available to strengthen and improve the quality and scale of parental involvement, which includes improving schools' and education authorities' communications and

outreach with parents. Recognition needs to be given to the challenges in ensuring that all parents are informed and involved.

17. We are pleased to note that parents have their own 'basket', and also that parental involvement is mentioned throughout the other 'baskets'. However, the parent 'basket' in the Framework needs to be tied in with other developments to strengthen and improve parental involvement, as a consistent approach is needed. It may be that changes to the legislative framework on parental involvement are required in order to fulfil these ambitions.
18. Greater consideration needs to be given to the early years and to children with additional support needs in terms of how the testing will work and the impact it will have on children and parents. In terms of closing the attainment gap, it could be argued that more early years support that meets children and parents' needs, and ensuring the implementation of existing legislation in relation to additional support needs, would have a considerable impact on helping to reduce inequalities of outcome.
19. As NPFS sits on both the Strategic and the Design Groups, we have an overview of the development of the Framework and can contribute parents' views and concerns as well as providing input on the best means of strengthening the parent 'basket'. We have already asked for an impact analysis on the effect of the new assessments on children and young people, and are pleased that Scottish Government have said they will consider this.

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