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Speech in the Scottish Parliament

Curriculum for Excellence

Under the previous Executive, for the first time, a curriculum for excellence brought together a single curriculum for three-to-18 year olds.

It clearly stated why we educate our children and how we intend to educate them.

It was designed to ensure that young people develop literacy and numeracy skills and other essential skills and knowledge that they will need for work and life.

The Scottish Executive at the time set out a programme for development with a view to beginning the implementation in 2009-10. I reiterate that date—2009-10—because we are already in 2008.

I welcome what the cabinet secretary said about the drive for basic skills and I welcome the commission for literacy that Labour has proposed, which will ensure that no child is left behind.

As a Dundee-based MSP, however, I see the welcome cultural diversity in the city and therefore my additional concern is that children who speak English as their second language have not only literacy needs, but language needs.

That issue needs to be addressed in the curriculum, in relation to not just Dundee, but Scotland as a whole.

There is growing concern about the direction in which the Government is taking education.

The latest EIS briefing raises concerns about the "lack of engagement with the profession as a whole and an increasingly top-down nature of the whole development programme".

That contradicts directly what the cabinet secretary said.

The vision of the curriculum for excellence seems to be under threat and underresourced.

I await the coming announcements, as does everyone in the education establishment, and I hope that there will be improvements.

However, it is undisputed by the teaching profession that the Government's pledge to reduce class sizes in P1 to P3 is not possible within the given budget.

Only in areas in which there are falling school rolls will that be possible in anything like the near future.

It goes against the trend in some areas in which the school rolls are rising.

I share the concern that lack of progress by the current Administration on education will mean that the implementation date for a curriculum for excellence will not be met.

There is a need for leadership from the Government to ensure that meaningful progress is made—frankly, a change in rhetoric is not enough.

As we have heard, pupils learn best in groups, and when the subjects are meaningful and link with other subjects.

Although many pupils might have an interest in Scottish history, there are many other subjects, and it can be unhealthy to put such an emphasis on one subject.

I speak as a former teacher of English who thoroughly enjoyed teaching Scottish literature in schools, even when I taught in Liverpool.

A curriculum for excellence offers the opportunity to develop resources and learning situations that cover more than one subject area.

I commend Learning and Teaching Scotland for the materials and guidance that it has provided, but the EIS is asking for more leadership on how best all that can be facilitated.

Teachers must be given the time and the opportunity to engage, and the developments need to be resourced.

Innovations such as glow and other technology give teachers opportunities to take ownership of a curriculum for excellence, and can give them more freedom to teach in creative ways.

Primary schools in Dundee are taking part in a pilot using hand-held Nintendo DS consoles to support interactive learning.

Like all pilots, the scheme will need additional funding to mainstream the already encouraging results. The Government will neglect the children of Dundee and beyond if additional funding is not made available as part of the curriculum for excellence.

The recent OECD report outlined the need to build on the programme, and it cited the need for innovation in plans to deal with skills and attainment.

However, that should not lead to excessive attainment measuring by local authorities and HMIE.

This morning, I had the wonderful opportunity of visiting the newly opened and purpose-built Donaldson's college with Bill Kidd, a fellow member of the Equal Opportunities Committee.

The school is examining, as are many others, how a curriculum for excellence can help to direct its learning and teaching, while incorporating the many examples of good practice that are already in evidence.

The advert for the television documentary that will be shown on Monday evening describes Donaldson's college as specialising in preparing young people for life in a hearing world.

That sums up what the curriculum for excellence is about: preparing our young people for work and life beyond school.

I urge members—to continue the advert—to watch the programme on BBC2 on Monday night, even if they cannot visit Donaldson's in person.

Decisions on the future of the curriculum for excellence are essential, and they need to be made as soon as possible. The shape of the secondary curriculum is still unclear, and until the questions that members have raised today are answered, it will be difficult to determine how levels of attainment are being raised.

It will also be difficult to demonstrate how pupils will be supported to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.

Teachers, parents and pupils in Scotland are waiting for leadership on that.

WEBSITE LINKS

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