

REFORM SCOTLAND NEWS RELEASE

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JANUARY 30TH 2009**

EDUCATION REFORM MUST START WITH THOSE LET DOWN BY CURRENT SYSTEM

Priority should be given to improving opportunity for disadvantaged children if Scotland is to restore its reputation as a world leader in education, a leading think tank recommends today. [FRI]

Reform Scotland says the keys to better education for all in the long term are more power for parents to choose where their children are taught and greater autonomy for schools.

In the short term, the process must start by focussing on children from poorer backgrounds, too many of whom are 'falling through the gaps' and not being offered the education they need to help them fulfil their potential.

In a report entitled *Parent Power*, the independent, non-party think tank calls for the introduction of a radical 'entitlement scheme' that would give all families much wider freedom of choice over which schools to send their children, including new, independently-run schools. Central government would supplement the entitlement for children from less well-off families and those with special educational needs.

It recommends that the scheme is available initially to parents and guardians of children who currently qualify for free school meals, where the need is greatest, before being extended to all.

'This is all about creating an education system that extends opportunity and promotes social mobility,' says Reform Scotland Director Geoff Mawdsley, one of the report's authors.

'This is not something that can happen overnight. But what we are putting forward is a long-term strategy that will benefit countless numbers of children who, unless we make radical changes, will be failed by an education system that does not meet their needs.'

In a series of root-and-branch reforms, the report also calls for councils to allow more state-funded schools to be run independently and the establishment of more diverse schools which would increase competition and drive up educational standards across the system.

Reform Scotland says that while there are many good and varied state schools in Scotland, too many children are not being offered the education they need to make the most of their lives.

It says that despite huge increases in the amount of money invested in education over the past decade, the state schools system is failing those who most need it.

Research shows that schools with higher percentages of pupils registered for free school meals – a key social indicator – have lower exam results, more youngsters leaving and not continuing in education, training or work, and higher levels of truancy.

Drawing on major educational advances in countries such as Sweden, Canada and the Netherlands, Reform Scotland says greater parental choice is a common denominator in all progressive systems.

Under the entitlement scheme, parents or guardians would be given a credit equal to the average cost of educating a pupil in their local authority catchment area. This could then be used to send their child to any school that costs the same as or less than the credit.

If an independent, state-funded school charged fees that were higher than the value of the entitlement, parents would not be able to top-up the difference. But children who receive free school meals or have special educational needs would be given a supplement, from central government, on top of their credit.

'This would give parents a greater say in choosing the school they believe will help their child fulfil his or her potential, whether it is a state school in the same area, a state school on the other side of town or an independently run state-funded school, so long as its charges were the same as or less than the value of the entitlement,' said Mr Mawdsley.

The parental choice scheme should, for the first two years, be open to parents and guardians of children who currently receive free school meals, before being rolled out to all.

Mr Mawdsley added: 'This emphasises the most important aim of these reforms, which is to help pupils from more disadvantaged backgrounds who are the pupils most obviously being failed by the current system.'

‘During the initial period, these parents would be given priority over other parents using the existing placement request system.’

The report says that greater choice between schools leads to increased competition and this, in turn, results in improved attainment in all schools – an advantage highlighted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] in its Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] published in 2007.

“Across OECD countries, 60% of students were enrolled in schools whose principals reported competing with two or more other schools in the local area. Across countries, having a larger number of schools that compete for students is associated with better results, over and above the relationship with student background.”

The Reform Scotland paper says there is nothing currently to prevent new schools opening and operating privately, so long as they meet required guidelines.

‘However, providing the entitlement to parents to send their child to the school of their choice will increase the potential demand for independent, state-funded schools and so provide an important stimulus for the establishment of new schools,’ says the report.

‘As with existing private schools, new non-state schools would only be eligible for the parental choice scheme if their fees were the same as or less than the value of the entitlement.’

The report adds: ‘Schools should not choose pupils on the basis of ability – parents and pupils should choose schools. As more schools open, the supply of independent school places should broadly match demand.’

Parent Power also recommends that local authorities be given power over pay and conditions for teachers, potentially ending nationalised pay bargaining.

And it says that while many state schools should be allowed to continue operating as they do now under local authority control, councils could choose to allow some schools to become independent if they wished, handing over their running to the schools themselves.

Reform Scotland chairman Ben Thomson, one of the co-authors of the report, said: ‘In these hard economic times, it is more important than ever that we have an education system that gives all youngsters in Scotland the opportunity to achieve their goals and realise their full potential.’

'The key to our proposals is that they do not interfere with existing local authority schools, many of which are run very well. However, it provides the mechanism through parental choice to address the serious problem of under-performing schools, especially those with a high percentage of socially-disadvantaged children.

'We believe, and research from overseas backs this up, that giving parents and guardians a greater say in the education of their children should ensure that Scotland can start to address its declining educational position on international league tables. Scotland can, once again, aspire to be the leading light in educational development.'

A full copy of Parent Power is attached.

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For a hard copy of the report, please email info@reformscotland.com

Notes to Editors

1. Reform Scotland is an independent, non-party think tank whose objective is to set out a better way to deliver increased economic prosperity and better public services based on the traditional Scottish principles of limited government, diversity and personal responsibility.
2. The authors of the report are Ben Thomson, Chairman of Reform Scotland, Geoff Mawdsley, Director of Reform Scotland and Alison Payne, Research Director of Reform Scotland.