



Level the Playing Field: High Quality Education for All

Proposals from Ross Greer MSP and the Scottish Greens

Foreword by Ross Greer MSP

Education is the number one priority of this government. They've asked us to judge them not just on their performance in education but on their progress closing the attainment gap between young people from the most and least deprived communities. It's a laudable aim but from their actions so far, you'd wonder if they'd forgotten all about it.

Attempts at unnecessary governance changes have been met with opposition from teachers, parents, councils, experts and young people themselves.

Abandoned as a piece of legislation, they will instead be snuck through by executive actions of the government, avoiding votes in parliament which they would lose.

School staff are on the verge of strike action after a decade of erosion in their pay and increasingly impossible workload demands, driven not just by additional administrative tasks and curricular changes but by ten years of budget cuts which have seen thousands of teachers and support staff lost and those left in post carrying more and more of the burden. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in supporting children with additional needs.

None of this is inevitable. It is the result of political choices, many made by this government. In this paper we propose a series of measures which would tackle the real challenges in Scottish education; budget cuts, teacher shortages and the loss of essential support staff, rather than answer a question which wasn't being asked of governance arrangements.

Perhaps more importantly, we want to make the point that the attainment gap does not start in classrooms and our schools do not exist in siloes. Poverty is a societal problem and we can only solve it as a society. Tackling poverty at source will close the attainment gap far more effectively than in-school measures, no matter how welcome and needed they are.

Level The Playing Field is not a manifesto. It is not exhaustive. It is a series of proposals across a range of areas which, if implemented, would make a real and transformative difference in the lives of many young people, their families and Scotland as a whole.

If the government were to take up any of these proposals, they would find our support.



Credit: Andrew O'Brien/Church of Scotland

Introduction

It is a basic right of every child in Scotland to receive a high quality education, one which places them on equal footing with their peers regardless of their background. Policy changes within education alone will not achieve this. To do it, we need to both improve the situation in our schools and tackle the societal issue of poverty which profoundly affects a child's chances of making the most of their education. It is only through a holistic approach that we can close the poverty-based attainment gap and live up to our commitment to give every child in Scotland the best possible start in life.



School funding and teaching



Plug the funding shortfall

Funding for education has declined by over £330 million in real terms over the last 10 years, as local councils have borne the brunt of austerity. The Scottish Greens have prevented the Scottish Government's plan for further cuts to local councils in the last two budgets to the tune of over £330m, but a shortfall from previous years of austerity continues.

Green proposals to raise additional revenue include a vacant land tax raising £200 million per year and an additional £331 million from progressive changes to income tax.

Restore the value of teachers' pay

The public sector pay freeze hit teacher pay hard, resulting in a 20% decline in the value of salaries and leading to a recruitment and retention crisis, which has in turn compounded existing workload challenges for those still in post. Reversing the real term decline in teacher pay is essential to resolving the teaching workforce challenge we currently face.

Additional needs in Initial Teacher Education

One in four pupils have an identified additional support need (ASN) – and many more remain unidentified. Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses must include quality ASN training as a core component, not an optional module.

Further ASN training opportunities for all teachers

ITE can only provide for so much, particularly with the vast array of additional needs which teachers are expected to support. At present, access to Continued Professional Development (CPD) is restricted by limited budgets and the lack of available supply staff. Sufficient funding must be allocated to allow for necessary CPD opportunities throughout a teacher's career.

Make Additional Support Needs teaching a promoted post

The education sector should reward those teachers who become ASN specialists by integrating their qualifications into career progression. This will encourage more teachers to invest in further training and move into the specialist ASN teaching field, reversing the loss of over 500 ASN teaching posts over the last decade.

Restore the bursary to student Educational Psychologists

A significant increase in diagnosed mental health issues amongst young people has come alongside a significant fall in the number of educational psychologists within our schools. Restoring the bursary for Educational Psychology courses will bring more people into this desperately needed profession.

Right to counselling in every school

Many young people experience mental health issues, but more than 250,000 pupils have no access to in-school counselling, unlike their counterparts in Wales, who have a right to such support. Instituting a similar right in Scotland would compel local authorities to ensure that all young people have access to in-school counselling.

A recent BBC investigation found fourteen councils had no on-site school counsellors and provision by others was irregular

Fostering Active and Responsible Citizens



Sex, relationships, and gender education for all

All young people should be guaranteed an education which is inclusive and covers key life lessons and principles of relationships. LGBTI+ inclusion and consent-based sex and relationship education should be core to the curriculum in all schools.

Rights at Work

With large numbers leaving school and entering notoriously exploitative sectors such as hospitality and the so-called 'gig economy,' young people should be aware of their rights, from wages to conditions to the role of trade unions. Workplace rights should be a core component of Personal and Social Education, expanding on the STUC's 'Unions into Schools' initiative.

Healthy Minds Healthy Students

As mental ill health becomes a major problem for young people, all primary and secondary pupils should receive quality mental health education, delivered in collaboration between education authorities, the NHS and third sector.

Learning to distinguish good and bad mental health, where to go for support and valuable skills such as Mental Health First Aid can go a long way in preventing poor mental health and in supporting those who are experiencing it.

The number of educational psychologists in Scottish schools has declined by 10% in the last 10 years and the number of referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services has risen 22% in the last 4 years, to record levels.

Co-Designed Curriculums

The evidence for co-designed curriculums being more effective is strong. In Personal and Social Education in particular, young people should be involved in shaping the topics covered, to ensure that content is current and responsive to their needs.

The Scottish Parliament's Education Committee has highlighted Bearsden Academy's lessons on the 'Sixth Year Holiday' as an excellent example of co-design, after the topic was suggested by young people.

Quality Personal and Social Education for Every Young Person

Some schools are exemplary when addressing many or all of the issues covered above, while others allow PSE to be marginalised and squeezed out of the timetable. Standardising the delivery of Personal and Social Education will ensure that young people are consistently given the opportunity to learn and develop essential life skills.

Outdoor and Play-based Learning

Learning outdoors and in a play-based environment brings many benefits to children and encourages an active lifestyle. All early years education in Scotland should ensure access to outdoor play and nature.

Cost of the school day



Income maximisation advisors linked

Thousands of families on low incomes do not realise what welfare support they are entitled to, missing out on hundreds or thousands of pounds a year. Advice and support workers linked to schools, following the Healthier Wealthier Children model used with GP surgeries in Glasgow and similar schemes in Edinburgh, will ensure families get the essential support they are entitled to.

In Greater Glasgow, the Healthier Wealthier Children scheme raised over £16 million for families in the seven years it has operated. The average gain was around £4,000 per family in benefits that they were entitled to, but had not been receiving.

Free School Meals – All Year Round

Free school meals are vital for many young people living in poverty but hunger is not limited to term time. Free lunch clubs, offered during term time and

In Finland, one of the world leaders in education, all school pupils receive free school meals, ensuring no-one is too hungry to learn.

the holidays, directly tackle food poverty and the scandal of hungry children in Scotland. Giving all young people a healthy, attractive in-school options will also tackle the obesity and other health challenges associated with secondary school students 'eating out' at lunchtime.

Breakfast clubs

All young people have a right to food and food poverty is not tackled by free lunches alone. All schools should be supported to provide free nutritious breakfast clubs to any pupils who choose to take them up. School meals should come from local produce wherever possible and contribute to a food education from field to plate.

Cost of school uniforms

Unnecessary and expensive uniform policies, i.e. blazers with special braiding or items from select suppliers should be prevented at local council level. All uniform policies should ensure that a full set of uniforms can be purchased for no more than the uniform grant provided by the local authority.

Support fund for other school costs

Many 'one-off' costs, such as school trips can quickly add up and exclude poorer pupils. Significant costs, such as for the common residential trip in Primary 7, exclude large numbers of young people every year. A support fund will ensure that small but meaningful grants are available for all costs.

Culture of costs

Teachers and schools should be encouraged to be more aware of excess costs which act to exclude pupils from poorer backgrounds. Implicit biases and expectations which act to further disadvantage pupils from more deprived backgrounds must be addressed, with training and support provided by the local authority in the first instance.

Beyond education



Top up Child Benefit by £5

Child benefit goes straight into the pockets of families with children. Topping it up by £5 per week would lift 30,000 children out of poverty, transforming their opportunity to make the most of their education.

Uprate entitlements in-line with inflation

It is not fair that those receiving support should get poorer simply because of inflation. Uprating entitlements will prevent those already on or below the poverty line from falling further.

Automatic payment of entitlements

Too much of the support which families are entitled to goes unclaimed. Where possible, entitlements should be paid out automatically, without applications having to be made.

Millions in entitlements go unclaimed every years because people do not know what they are entitled to. Income maximisation policies like Healthier Wealthier Children have helped to address this, but ultimately we should ensure people automatically receive what they are entitled to.

Introduce a Young Carers Allowance

Many young people make a vital contribution to care work, but do not qualify for Carer's Allowance. We are pleased the Scottish Government have agreed to the Greens' proposal for a Young Carers Allowance and will work to ensure it provide the support young carers need and deserve.

End benefits sanctions

Removing vital support as a punishment is unjust and only heaps additional pressure on those on low incomes and their children. We are pleased that the Scottish Government have agreed to Green proposals to end benefit sanctions associated with the work programme, eliminating an estimated 13,000 sanctions a year. Further options for reducing sanctions within devolved competencies should be explored.

Healthier Wealthier Children

The Healthier Wealthier Children programme links income maximisation advisors to health visitors and helps low income families access the support they are entitled to. The Scottish Greens have secured government support for this programme to be implemented across Scotland, which will result in thousands of families receiving thousands of pounds a year which they are entitled to but not currently receiving.

Free bus travel for young people

We already recognise the important of concessionary bus travel for elderly people. It is just as important for young people. Travel costs should not be a barrier to inclusion.

Expanding concessionary travel for all children, those who accompany their

children on the journey to school via public transport and those in full time education will increase access, reduce acute air pollution and associated public health issues and eliminate another financial burden for many low-income families.

A few pounds a day on bus travel quickly adds up. With student and child tickets being squeezed and cut by private bus operators looking to maximise their profits, free bus travel would ensure no families are forced further into poverty due to the cost of travel to and from school.

Remove precarious work from positive destinations statistics

We should not pretend zero-hours contracts or bogus self-employment are positive destinations for young people. A clear definition of positive destinations which excludes such work should be adopted by the Scottish Government and its agencies.

Enterprise funding should support good employment practices

Massive multi-national companies who exploit their workers should not be receiving government funding. Enterprise funding should be directed only to employers who pay at least the real Living Wage, including to their youngest workers and who do not engage in exploitative practices such as zero-hours contracts.

Scotland Guarantee

Almost 1 in 7 young people from Scotland's most deprived areas leave school without entering a job, training, or further education. The 'Edinburgh Guarantee' should be expanded nationwide to ensure all of our young people have clear opportunities as they leave school.

