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ROOTED IN LABOUR > READY TO LEAD

Renewing Scottish Education

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**We must break the consensus
of silence and renew our
education system.**

**Education must once again
be at the heart of building a
modern and fairer Scotland.**

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Education is foundational. It shapes the opportunities available to every young person, gives families confidence in the future, strengthens the communities we live in and provides the skills, knowledge and talent on which our economy depends. Few areas of public policy reach so deeply into every part of our national life or matter so much to the kind of country we want Scotland to be.

It is also foundational to our Labour values. Education has always been one of the great levellers: a means by which we can widen opportunity, break down barriers, and give every child the chance to fulfil their potential regardless of the circumstances they are born into. Building a fairer and more equal nation depends on getting education right. Both of my parents were teachers, so I grew up understanding not only the difference a good education can make to an individual life, but the wider role schools play in strengthening families, communities, and society.

Curriculum for Excellence has not delivered

We must, however, admit that Curriculum for Excellence has not delivered on the ambition which led to its creation. Problems have emerged in the framework itself, its implementation has too often been mismanaged, and successive rounds of reform have failed to confront the fundamental issues within the system. Instead, too much reform has attempted to paper over cracks rather than address their causes. The result is a curriculum which is serving too many of our young people poorly. It has also left employers increasingly concerned that new generations are not being equipped with the knowledge and skills required to take full advantage of the opportunities of a mid-21st-century economy.

Part of the problem in diagnosing these failures has been the cynical stripping out of data from our education system, leaving Scottish education in what Professor Lindsay Paterson has correctly described as a 'data desert'. Scotland withdrew from important international studies which allowed meaningful comparisons with other education systems, while objective national measures of literacy and numeracy were removed. At the same time, the Scottish Government has increasingly relied on broad and flimsy measures such as 'positive destinations' as evidence of success after school. These can place insecure zero-hours work in the same broad category as secure employment, an apprenticeship, or a university place. The result is a system in which it has become harder, rather than easier, to make an objective judgement about whether education is delivering for young people.

From what we do know objectively, however, we know that it is not good enough. Over the two decades since CfE was conceived, Scotland's international educational performance has declined significantly. Scottish pupils are now roughly a year of learning behind their peers in England in mathematics, while the gap between young people from the richest and poorest communities remains unacceptably wide despite years of apparent focus and action to tackle it. Under CfE, the number of subjects available to young people has narrowed compared with



previous generations, with pupils attending schools in poorer areas more likely to lose out. At the same time, we are facing growing problems with attendance and behaviour in our schools, disrupting the learning opportunities of all pupils, while specialist educational support has failed to keep pace with the rapidly growing number of children and young people who need it.

Breaking the consensus of silence

We must also recognise our collective responsibility as parliamentarians for where we now find ourselves. In recent years particularly, there has been something approaching a consensus of silence around education as a foundational area of public policy. Across Parliament, we have not subjected the direction of Scottish education to the sustained scrutiny that its importance demands. In doing so, we have allowed the SNP Government to sleepwalk into a position where the system does not appear to be serving young people, their families, the staff who educate them, or the wider economy as well as it should.

Breaking that consensus of silence starts with a simple question: what education system does modern Scotland need?

Our education system needs a national renewal in its focus. Too often, debates about education are siloed, with the system talking internally to itself while the voices of families, young people, and employers are left outside. The foundational importance of education surely means that it deserves far greater scrutiny in our Parliament, comparable to the attention we rightly give to our NHS. If I am elected leader of Scottish Labour, education will once again be a foundational priority for our party.

An education system for the Scotland of today and the future
It is now more than twenty years since Curriculum for Excellence was designed and sixteen years since it was first implemented

across Scotland's schools. Every cohort to leave secondary school for more than a decade has now been educated under CfE. Accepting without question that a curriculum conceived more than twenty years ago can continue to meet the needs of Scotland's society and economy in 2026 would be like assuming that a curriculum designed in the early 1980s was automatically fit for purpose at the turn of the millennium.

Even if Curriculum for Excellence had worked as intended, even if its implementation had been seamless, and even if we were not facing serious problems in areas such as Additional Support Needs provision, teacher recruitment, retention and growing, and dissatisfaction with aspects of schooling, there would still be an imperative to ask whether our education system matches the Scotland, and the global economy young people are entering, of 2026. The fact that CfE has failed to deliver on its ambition makes that task even more urgent.

We also need to acknowledge we must put knowledge back at the heart of the curriculum. Curriculum for Excellence was right to place greater emphasis on skills, but those skills cannot exist in a vacuum. Critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving all depend on young people having a strong foundation of knowledge across subjects. We need to restore that balance, ensuring pupils leave school with both the knowledge and the skills they need to succeed.

Preparing for the future

The rapid acceleration of artificial intelligence is perhaps the clearest example of why renewal is now necessary. The disruption it is bringing to our lives, our education system, wider society and, crucially, our economy is already happening at pace, and that pace will only accelerate in the years ahead. The Scottish Government's response to getting to grips with this

challenge in schools has been pathetic. Its response to the much bigger question of how we equip the workforce of tomorrow for this transformation has been even weaker.

In the last session of Parliament, ministers shied away from taking meaningful action even on the immediate question of the role AI may play in disrupting things like assessment. There has been far too little serious discussion about the much greater challenge: how our curriculum develops the knowledge, skills, and confidence young people will need to navigate AI, understand it, and take advantage of the opportunities it will create in whatever they go on to do after school.

There is a case in point here. The narrowing of subject choice for young people has had a significant impact on their ability to access STEM subjects in the senior phase. At the same time, failures in workforce planning have contributed to shortages in key teaching areas such as computing. It should come as no surprise that both of these problems are more acutely felt in schools serving disadvantaged communities. Unless we act, those inequalities risk becoming even more entrenched as technology transforms our economy, and the nature of work and all our young people will be affected.



A national renewal in education

It is clear that renewing our education system will require us to draw on the widest possible range of experience and expertise. Teachers and support staff, young people, and families, trade unions, employers, colleges and universities all have a role to play in shaping what comes next. We cannot allow education policy to continue to be developed within silos, detached from the experiences of those who work in our schools, rely on them or depend on the skills and opportunities they create.

If I am elected leader of Scottish Labour, education will once again become a major national priority for our party. We will put serious political energy into developing the policies Scotland needs, engaging properly with those who understand both the strengths and weaknesses of the current system and looking outward at what works elsewhere. That work must be ambitious, but it must also be practical. Reform cannot simply mean changing structures, creating new bodies, or producing another round of reports. Our education system has had enough of botched, incremental, top-down reform which asks more of those working within it while providing too little of the support and resources required to deliver change.

Any reform must ultimately be judged by whether it improves the experience of young people in classrooms, gives teachers and other staff the support they need to do their jobs and improves the opportunities available to young people when they leave school and enter further education, training or the economy.

Our objective must be to build an education system designed for the Scotland of the future. That means restoring breadth and opportunity, raising standards and ensuring that every young person has the chance to succeed regardless of their background. It also means thinking much more seriously about the world young people will enter after school, the skills our economy will require and the profound changes that technologies such as artificial intelligence will bring.

Scotland cannot spend another decade managing the consequences of a system that is no longer delivering well enough. We need a period of national renewal in education, rooted in Labour values and focused relentlessly on giving every young person the knowledge, skills and opportunities they need to succeed.

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