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Programme for Government

This week, the First Minister set out the first Programme for Government of this new Parliament. At its heart is a commitment to prevention, tackling inequality and ensuring that people across Scotland are given every opportunity to succeed.

Education is central to that mission. We know that investing in our children and young people is one of the most powerful ways to enact transformative change. It opens up opportunities, strengthens communities and supports Scotland's future. While there is much to celebrate in Scottish education, including the Results Day data that showed improvements at all levels of academic excellence this year, record numbers of vocational qualifications and continued progress in narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap, we must be clear and realistic about the challenges that remain.

On Wednesday I made a statement to the Scottish Parliament setting out my vision and ambitions for education during this parliamentary term. I write to you to draw out some of the key themes that shape that vision and our Programme for Government.

I commend the commitment of the teaching workforce, young people and their parents and carers who together achieve excellence in our system. However, over the course of this Parliamentary session we must confront the challenges that remain including a stubborn attainment gap, unwarranted variation in outcomes, lingering Covid impacts and new challenges in a changing world including the impact of smart phones in young people's lives.

We will therefore give renewed focus to the things that matter most to the education workforce – the ABCs of education: attainment, attendance, behaviour and curriculum.

Through further investment we will continue to work to close the poverty-related attainment gap, empowering schools to invest in their pupils as they see fit. We are investing £200 million this year and I am committed to continuing funding to headteachers to tackle poverty-related disadvantage in ways that are best for their schools.

Overcoming barriers to an excellent education also means attending to varying Additional Support Needs. I intend to deliver the six recommendations of the McManus Review over this

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Parliamentary term and last week published a routemap for a National Staged Intervention Model - the first milestone in this process.

To improve attainment we must also ensure attendance is high and absence minimised. We are taking a range of actions to overcome absence challenges through bespoke resources and support for councils, families and schools, improved data and a national media campaign. I will be closely monitoring progress on this.

On behaviour, I recognise that the vast majority of children and young people are well behaved and conscientious in school. However, the Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research also showed increases in low level disruption, disengagement and serious disruptive behaviour, particularly since the pandemic. Reports of violence are mostly in our primary schools, and mostly in our youngest children in primary 1 to 3. We continue to work with partners on implementing our national action plan to address key areas of concern and in the coming months we will complete work on principles for recording and monitoring of behaviour and update our national guidance on exclusions.

Through BISSR, secondary school teachers highlighted mobile phones as the behaviour having the biggest impact on their teaching. I am taking forward legislation to end the presence of mobile phones in the learning environment for good. The consultation on our proposed legislation opened on 25 August and will run for 12 weeks. I strongly encourage people to respond with their views.

Additionally, as part of our public health approach to online harm, last week we launched a marketing campaign on online safety and we are ensuring young people know how to confront misogynistic and hateful behaviour through our support of the Digital Discourse Initiative. As the First Minister set out in our Programme, we must all play our part in tackling Violence Against Women and Girls, and education is central to that.

The Curriculum Improvement Cycle represents the largest ever reform to Curriculum for Excellence. It will clarify the role of knowledge across our curriculum and make clearer pupils' progression through learning, providing certainty on how to approach key topics like language and maths.

The initial development work is nearing completion, with further materials to be shared in the autumn. I will ensure this builds on the results of Scotland's participation in PISA 2025 which will be published next week.

As we deliver curriculum reform with our teaching workforce, we will also be working with local government to take forward work on Reducing Class Contact Time from 22.5 hours per week to 21, ensuring teachers have more protected time to focus on planning and delivering high-quality learning. Having listened carefully to voices consistently highlighting a lack of job certainty offered by their local authority employers we will deliver the reforms needed to provide a teacher job guarantee, for a minimum of three years for newly qualified teachers. We will also shortly bring forward plans to help primary teachers who want to transition into new roles and will strengthen career opportunities and support for Pupil Support Assistants. While that work is ongoing, I was pleased to announce a new £1 million Teacher Recruitment Assistance Fund, to support recruitment and retention in our rural and island communities.

We must also seize the opportunity of Public Service Reform to truly achieve excellence and equity. This means addressing variability in education outcomes across the country, improving

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data collection, enhancing performance and accountability and empowering our headteachers and schools in the right areas.

We must reduce unnecessary bureaucracy and as an early commitment to that, I have instructed my officials to ensure that government guidance, which in my view has become too long and repetitious, will be significantly streamlined, with precise and concise communication that teachers can more readily navigate.

Alongside this, the Scottish Government remains committed to reducing the cost of the school day, supporting our educators and expanding opportunities for children and families. This includes through our ambitious plans for childcare transformation that will provide childcare support from 9 months to the end of primary school. From ensuring every primary school child has access to a breakfast club and extending free school means to supporting professional development for the teaching workforce, we will continue to put children and their families at the heart of our policy making.

What I have outlined in this letter is ambitious, and it cannot be achieved by government alone. We must continue to work in partnership across local government, schools, the teaching workforce, communities and families to build an education system that our children and young people can be proud of. One that delivers excellence and opportunity for all.

I look forward to further engagement on all of this in the coming weeks and to working with you on this shared endeavour.



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