

## Teaching and Learning for Educational Improvement and Equity: policy learning from home and abroad

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*In Scotland and around the world, the quest continues to achieve large-scale educational improvement that will ensure equitable access to high-quality educational experiences for all children and young people. At the same time, there is clear evidence of a global crisis in the teaching profession - yet a well-trained, supported and motivated teaching workforce is essential if countries are to achieve equitable educational improvement. This Briefing draws on the concept of 'policy learning' to consider these challenges, outlining the experience of a successful large-scale educational improvement in Ontario and offering insights from a range of international studies as well as from Scotland's own policy history.*

- The teaching profession is facing a significant crisis globally: fewer people want to be teachers, and issues of workload, stressful working conditions, work intensification, and poor retention for the teaching profession are all evident.
- The province of Ontario in Canada implemented a successful large-scale education reform programme to advance both excellence and equity in primary and secondary schools (2003 to 2018).
- This demonstrates that reform is possible if there is significant political will; clear and specific focus on a small number of core priorities; and sustained dedicated resourcing and support for teachers. Attention to implementation beyond policy announcements is critical.
- The reforms included a comprehensive range of supporting strategies; targeted focus on reducing inequities for students, respect for professional capacity and a system of continuing teacher education and leadership development. Research, evaluation, and data were integral features.
- The sustained and system-wide approach had a cumulative impact on student outcomes. Graduation rates from secondary school increased from 68% in 2004 to 87% in 2018. In elementary schools, the percentage of 8-9 year old students achieving the provincial standard in Reading, Writing and Math rose substantially in this period as did the performance of 11-12 year olds in Reading and Writing. The picture for Math was mixed.
- International studies demonstrate the central importance of effective professional learning and its positive impact on teachers' classroom practices and student learning. They highlight the central importance of strategies that develop, train, support and value the teaching profession.
- Scottish education has been characterised as having a 'review culture' with successive reviews and consultations in recent years, many with similar conclusions – the time is ripe for implementation rather than further reviews.
- As well as learning from international experiences, Scotland should draw on its own history and experience, for example, learn lessons from the Attainment Challenge.
- Education alone cannot solve structural inequalities in society but the evidence shows that large-scale educational improvement is possible. It requires a clear, specific, and sustained focus on improving teaching and learning through policies and strategies that support improvements for both students and teachers.
- Learning from policy internationally and at home, it is possible to recommend a programme or 'Manifesto' for improving the Scottish education system - as outlined in the Briefing.

## Introduction

In Scotland and around the world, the quest continues to achieve large-scale educational improvement that will ensure equitable access to high-quality educational experiences for all children and young people. At the same time, there is clear evidence of a global crisis in the teaching profession: fewer people want to be teachers, and issues of workload, stressful working conditions, work intensification, poor retention and declining public confidence in publicly-funded education are all evident. But a well-trained, supported and motivated teaching workforce is essential if countries are to achieve equitable educational improvement.

This Briefing draws on international evidence (including from Scotland), to consider these challenges: how to achieve large-scale educational improvement for all and respond to the global crisis in teaching. It draws on the concept of ‘policy learning’, that is learning from other countries experiences by identifying common trends, clarifying alternative strategies as well as learning from one’s own policy history (Raffe, 2011). This approach differs fundamentally from ‘policy borrowing’ whereby policy-makers search the international experience for examples of ‘best practice’ to borrow and simply transfer back home without taking sufficient account of social, economic and cultural differences.

The Briefing outlines the experience of successful large-scale educational change in Ontario, then draws together lessons from a range of international literature and studies on how to develop and support teacher professional identities, and to promote effective professional learning which enables effective teaching that, in turn, improves students’ learning and well-being. Drawing on these experiences and lessons, it concludes by offering a ‘manifesto’ for the Scottish education system.

## Large-scale educational change is possible

The experience of the province of Ontario in Canada from 2003-2018 demonstrates that large-scale educational change is possible if there is significant political will, focused priorities, sustained resourcing and support for teachers.

The Ontario Government implemented a comprehensive education reform programme to advance both excellence and equity. This was under a government that made education its number one priority (Campbell, 2021). A key feature was its clear and specific focus on a small number of core priorities:

- increased student achievement with a particular focus on literacy and numeracy
- reduced gaps in student achievement addressing inequities for students
- increased public confidence in publicly-funded education
- student well-being (added later as a fourth priority).

Two main strategies were adopted: the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* focused on primary schools and *Student Success Learning to 18 Strategy* in the secondary sector.

The underpinning rationale of the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* was ‘capacity building with focus on results’, and following on from this, how to support the education profession to develop their capacity to improve students’ attainment. The latter point reflected the central belief that within a school, teachers and teaching are the most important factors in improving attainment, followed by school leaders and leadership.

*The Student Success Learning to 18* strategy was based on the core principle of providing appropriate supports for each student to progress, graduate, and transition into post-school destinations. Within this, emphasis was given to relationships – this built on previous research in Ontario that showed how a caring adult relationship could change a young person’s trajectory and could transform outcomes for at-risk students. The school leaving age was raised to 19 and significant changes were made to the curriculum, assessment and qualifications. The reforms in both primary and secondary schools included a comprehensive range of supporting strategies across equity initiatives; professional learning frameworks and leadership development programmes. Critically, dedicated funding was allocated to all of these and research, evaluation, and data were built into the programmes throughout.

*A whole system approach to capacity building with a focus on results*

Ontario’s approach centred on the ‘instructional core’— curriculum, instruction, and assessment —and recognised that this focus must run through all levels of the system: the classroom, the school, the district and the government. Features of the implementation of the reforms included:

- school district improvement plans and targets
- teams to support improvements in literacy and numeracy at regional, district and school levels
- capacity-building through professional learning for district and school leaders and for teachers in literacy and numeracy instruction

- identifying and providing targeted interventions and supports for schools that were lower achieving and/or struggling to improve and student groups in need of additional supports. The emphasis was on supportive interventions rather than any punitive approach (no league tables or takeovers)
- the development of Student Success Indicators and of a Student Success Action Plan combined with the appointment of district Student Success Leaders
- recruitment of additional secondary school teachers and the establishment of Student Success Teams in secondary schools to help implement the strategy and directly support struggling students
- using the Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways model to develop professional learning communities within and across schools. These worked collaboratively to investigate teaching practices and examine student work to identify areas of where students were struggling linked to curriculum and student contexts, then to develop, implement, monitor and document the most appropriate strategies to meet students' needs
- maintaining a focus on both achievement and equity
- parent and community engagement

An important lesson learned in the course of the reforms was recognising when to press forward and when to pause to give staff the space and time to consolidate learning and development, and to deepen implementation.

### *Significant improvements in outcomes*

Ontario's combination of system-wide strategies and resources and of targeted support where needed created a cumulative impact which was evident in significant improvement in outcomes over a relatively short period. Graduation rates<sup>1</sup> from secondary school increased from 68% in 2004 to 87% in 2018. In the Education Quality and Accountability Office provincial assessments, the percentage of 8-9 year old students (Grade 3) achieving the provincial standard in Reading rose from 54% in 2002-03 to 75% in 2017-18 while their results in Writing increased from 55% to 72%, and from 57% to 61% in Maths. The results for 11-12 years olds (Grade 6) also demonstrated improvements for Reading and Writing, from 54% for both subjects in 2002-03 to 82% for Reading and 80% for Writing in 2017-18. Performance in Math showed initial improvement, rising from 54% to 63% in 2008-09 but then dipping to 49% in 2017-18.

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<sup>1</sup> Defined as the percentage of students who graduate within five years of starting Grade 9.

## **Learning from experience of whole system reform in Ontario**

Certain key characteristics are evident in the reform process in Ontario and offer insights for that may inform or be adapted for education reform elsewhere:

- high standards and expectations for all students and schools
- data-driven identification of improvement needs
- transparency about existing practices whilst supporting improvements
- emphasis on support, respect, and valuing professional capacity
- system of continuing teacher education and workforce development
- strong attention to implementation beyond policy announcements

The experience of education reform in Ontario also highlights a number of debates and challenges that will apply to efforts to achieve large-scale educational improvement: questions about focus, balance, power and the extent to which education reform can address inequities:

- should reform emphasise tight literacy/numeracy focus or broader skills and competencies? What receives less attention when focusing on measurable outcomes?
- how to balance continuous improvement with teacher and student well-being?
- who decides and who benefits from reforms? When should government and/or local authorities direct versus allowing professional leadership? How much autonomy should schools and teachers have?
- the need for a broader and deeper understanding of equity, structural inequities and systemic racism

## **Towards a Professionally-Led Education System**

A number of international research studies and literature offer opportunities for policy learning (Cordingley et al., 2019; OECD, 2021; Campbell and Lewis, 2023; Campbell et al., 2024; United Nations 2024). They demonstrate that strategies and actions that develop, train, support and value the teaching profession enable the conditions where effective teaching can happen and that, in turn, improves students' learning and well-being. OECD

analysis combining PISA<sup>2</sup> data on students and TALIS<sup>3</sup> data on teachers concluded:

*'If there was only one conclusion to take away from this report, it is that what teachers do in and outside the classroom matters the most – and the most directly – for the cognitive and social-emotional outcomes of the school's students. Classroom practices that create opportunities to learn, teachers' use of working time, as well as the well-being and job satisfaction of the teachers are among the most influential school factors' (OECD, 2021, p.4).*

Taken together, the different research studies and papers offer valuable insights about how to develop and sustain teachers' professional identity, enable effective professional learning and promote teacher leadership to achieve high-quality teaching that improves student learning and well-being.

These include:

- need for explicit policies to address the declining status of the education profession and change the narrative in politics and the media about teaching to make it an attractive career and promote respect and trust in teachers and teaching
- provide support for teachers throughout their career path from initial teacher education onwards
- support and ensure access to effective professional learning and development, including collaborative opportunities
- address working conditions – time and workload balances - and working environments to promote positive relationships with colleagues and with students
- ensure adequate funding and resources.
- develop teacher agency and sense of self-efficacy, trusting them to innovate and improve within an overall system

A recurring theme in the research literature is the central importance of effective professional learning and how this has a positive impact on classroom practices and student learning. This was demonstrated in an international study focused on formative assessment and teacher leadership of professional learning (Campbell et al., 2024). It was based around collaborative teacher-led learning circles and involved seven countries across different continents, each with varying levels of resources, class sizes (some 60-100 students) and assessment systems. In only a one-year period the project achieved measurable results:

- for students there were improvements in learning, progression, confidence, agency, and academic achievement
- for teachers: engagement in professional learning, development of teacher leadership, and use of promising formative assessment practices
- for parents/caregivers: provision of feedback and communication to support timely and differentiated supports to students

The project identified key features of effective professional learning and development including the importance of teacher-led professional learning that is differentiated in relation to students' and teachers' needs and context and that has a practical and relevant focus. Interestingly, the project showed that while technology could be very useful, it is not essential - the countries varied in the extent to which teachers and students had ready access to wifi or devices. Rather, the starting point is to think what the teaching and learning practice is and then consider what technology or other resources are available to deliver it in the specific situation.

## What next for education in Scotland?

Scottish education might be said to have a 'review culture': it has been characterised in recent years by successive reviews and consultations, many of which reached similar conclusions. Since 2020 there has been a plethora of reviews covering support for learning; secondary education; curriculum; post-school education and skills; additional support needs ; technology in education; neurodiversity; religious observation and blind education. In addition, there was a large-scale National Discussion to develop a future vision for Scottish education (Campbell and Harris, 2023).

The question remains: with so many reviews producing similar findings, why the continued need for more reviews rather than focusing effort and resources on quality implementation of recommendations? The National Discussion on Education in 2022-23 (Campbell and Harris 2023), which 38,000 people engaged with, produced comprehensive and detailed 'Calls to Action' about learning and learning systems; inclusivity and diversity; health and well-being; education professionals; curriculum, future assessments and qualifications; digital futures; and human-centred educational improvement. As the concept of 'policy learning' suggests, Scotland also has its own history and experience to draw on, for example, to learn lessons from the Attainment Challenge launched in 2015 (with investment of over £1 billion over

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<sup>2</sup> the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment worldwide study to evaluate educational systems by measuring 15-year-olds' performance on mathematics, science, and reading.

<sup>3</sup> the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey of teachers and principals and how they, and their working and learning environments, compare internationally.

the past 10 years) to close the poverty-related attainment gap. Lessons, for example, on the need to share effective approaches and practices, greater clarity on how best to use funding at a time of resource constraints, and what the appropriate role of the school is within wider anti-poverty strategies and broader social policy. The structural reality is that schools cannot close the poverty-related attainment gap alone.

Learning from policy internationally and at home, a manifesto for the Scottish education system might include:

- fewer reviews, more decisions, and support processes and resources to implement them
- identify and focus on a small number of core priorities, communicate the priorities widely, and provide clearly aligned strategies and resources
- ensure pupils and students are at the centre of policy and practice with a focus on their learning, rights, voice, agency, achievement, progress, and equity
- value and respect the adults who work in education – as professionals, as leaders of educational improvement, and their humanity
- maintain the importance of the “instructional core” of curriculum, assessment and instruction with development and support of teaching and learning
- deepen understanding of, and actions to address, multiple and intersecting forms of inequity and disadvantage. Scotland’s goal has been closing the poverty-related attainment gap but other forms of inequity and disadvantage exist, for example, additional support needs
- recognise what schools can and cannot do and the imperative for collaboration, partnerships and networks to fully meet the needs and rights of all children and young people
- ensure access to and resources for high-quality professional learning and leadership development
- use research, evaluation and data throughout strategies, policies and practices

The evidence is there that with a clear, specific, and sustained focus on improving teaching and learning through policies, strategies and practices that resource and support improvements for both students and teachers, large-scale educational improvement is possible.

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### About this Briefing

*This Briefing is based on the public lecture given by given by Professor Carol Campbell at Moray House School of Education and Sport on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2025. It was the seventh Memorial Lecture in honour of the late Professor David Raffe, former director of CES. The lecture is available on YouTube:*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kS\\_tHYMq6f4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kS_tHYMq6f4)

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