



Empowering Teachers, Parents and Communities to Achieve Excellence and Equity in Education: A Governance Review
Response from the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) is the representative body of all the Jewish communities in Scotland. SCoJeC advances public understanding about the Jewish religion, culture and community, by providing information and assistance to educational, health, and welfare organisations, representing the Jewish community in Scotland to Government and other statutory and official bodies, and liaising with Ministers, MSPs, Churches, Trades Unions, and others on matters affecting the Jewish community. SCoJeC also provides a support network for the smaller communities and for individuals and families who live outwith any Jewish community or are not connected with any Jewish communities, and assists organisations within the Scottish Jewish community to comply with various regulatory requirements. SCoJeC also promotes dialogue and understanding between the Jewish community and other communities in Scotland, and works in partnership with other organisations and stakeholders to promote equality, good relations, and understanding among community groups.

In preparing this response we have consulted widely among members of the Scottish Jewish community.

1. What are the strengths of the current governance arrangements of Scottish education?

We very much welcome the emphasis both in current arrangements and in the consultation document on “getting it right for every child”, irrespective of his or her particular characteristics or needs. In particular that implies taking account of all aspects of diversity at the level of the individual, rather than only in terms of membership of a group. The fact that each child passes through the educational system only once means that his or her entire life can be ruined by an alienating educational experience, such as some of those we have unfortunately had reported to us. Preventing such negative outcomes for individuals and society requires making culturally appropriate provision for individual pupils from a minority background, and our response primarily relates to this perspective.

2. What are the barriers within the current governance arrangements to achieving the vision of excellence and equity for all?

We agree that “a whole system approach is required ... taking into account the wide range of relationships which education has with other people and bodies at a local,

regional and national level which support children and young people, parents and wider communities in Scotland.” (consultation document p.7) We are, however, concerned that, despite general good intentions, this objective is not always achieved.

“Governance” is not simply administration; it is the process of high-level policy-making, setting of objectives, oversight, audit of outcomes, response to assessment, etc. “Education governance” is thus not the “what” of decision-making, but the “how”, and the more decision-making and administration are devolved to individual schools, the more difficult it is, and thus the more safeguards must be implemented, to ensure fairness, equity, and equality of experience across the system.

Education governance should not only be concerned with the financial stability and day-to-day administration of schools, but also with the systems in place to ensure the well-being of those who study and teach in them. We are concerned that, in practice, the current governance system does not always provide a supportive environment for pupils from minority backgrounds, or with particular cultural or religious needs, and that their alienation is then sometimes exacerbated by a failure to facilitate a fair hearing, particularly for those pupils who may have been discriminated against or victimised on account of a protected characteristic.

The experiences of many people who responded to our Scottish Government funded inquiries into *Being Jewish in Scotland*¹ and *What’s Changed About Being Jewish in Scotland*² indicate that there is insufficient training for teachers and head teachers about the needs of Jewish pupils, about what constitutes antisemitism, and about how to identify and respond to it appropriately, and that as a result some are apathetic and unsupportive, and a few are unfortunately even positively antipathetic.

3. Should the above key principles underpin our approach to reform? Are there other principles which should be applied?

We agree with all the listed outcomes. We are, however, concerned that these are not always achieved, and that, as a result, some children, young people, parents, teachers, practitioners, and communities have a far less positive experience than should be the case. In particular, with regard to the first three of these outcomes, the feelings and needs of individuals, especially those from minority groups, must be addressed, and never be simply disregarded as outweighed by the majority. The challenge of “Getting it right for every child” is to do so for every child as an individual, and not simply for the average or majority or stereotypical child.

4. What changes to governance arrangements are required to support decisions about children’s learning and school life being taken at school level?

As we have said above, “governance” is not simply decision-making and administration, but the systems that are in place for setting goals, overseeing delivery, and assessing outcomes, and our experience leads us to be concerned that the more the former is devolved, the more the latter necessarily suffers.

¹ *Being Jewish in Scotland* (2012) http://www.scojec.org/bjis_findings.html

² *What’s Changed About Being Jewish in Scotland* (2015) http://www.scojec.org/bjis2_findings.html

5. What services and support should be delivered by schools? What responsibilities should be devolved to teachers and headteachers to enable this? You may wish to provide examples of decisions currently taken by teachers or headteachers and decisions which cannot currently be made at school level.

We recognise that there are many worthy reasons for devolving issues to the local level, such as responsiveness to local democratic pressures, or recognising that the urban-rural divide is yet another diversity issue that requires attention. However, there are some areas where that is not possible, and diversity is one such. In addition, managers need to be aware that a large democratic majority in favour of some measure can increase the alienation of the minority, so that mechanisms need to be in place to ensure that even pupils in a minority of one have their needs addressed. The localisation of decision-making, especially to units as small as a single school, would impact disproportionately on minority communities, and in particular on isolated individuals from those communities, especially those living in rural areas, and, in consequence, may contribute to, rather than address, much less prevent, negative social outcomes.

We are, therefore, concerned about both the devolution of policy-making as well as day-to-day administration to teachers and head teachers, unless there are very clearly defined policy objectives and oversight and audit arrangements. Our reasons for this are elaborated in response to question 6.

6. How can children, parents, communities, employers, colleges, universities and others play a stronger role in school life? What actions should be taken to support this?

We welcome “the Scottish Government’s wider commitment to the reform of public services to ensure they are fit to serve communities across Scotland.” and belief that “the best people to decide the future of our communities are the people who live in those communities.” (Introduction, p.3). It is, however, important to take into account that geographic communities are not the only ones to which public policy must have regard, but it is implicit in this section of the document, and explicit in Section 5, that the only communities being considered here are “local communities”. Even the reference to “local diversity” (p.11) refers merely to diversity within a local community, but “communities of interest” and “communities of identity”, often transcend “communities of geography”, and can in many ways be more central to the ways in which people interact with society. These must also be taken into account in shaping public services, including education.

We know from our own research that as many as one in three people who could truthfully have ticked “Jewish” in the census religion question did not do so, for a variety of reasons of which the most worrying is fear of becoming a victim of antisemitic attacks if their Jewish identity were to become known. Added to that, the very broad and inconsistent categories used in the census unfortunately inhibit correct identification, and with the result that some minorities may be literally invisible. Yet the smaller and more isolated these groups are, the more vulnerable they are, although their small size means that they will inevitably not be regarded as a priority at local level. We have, unfortunately, received many reports of children and parents being alienated by the lazy presumption that the entire population is either Christian or entirely secular, or by casual disregard when the matter is brought to the

attention of teachers and head teachers, and the more autonomy an individual school has, the more powerless the victims are. There must therefore be mechanisms in place to ensure that schools have proper regard for the diversity of diversity both in school management and in the curriculum.

The Scottish Government has recently recognised the need for positive measures to promote this through its support for the award-winning *Gathered Together* project³, a partnership between BEMIS and the SPTC to support parents from ethnic and cultural minorities to become more involved in their children's education and school communities, especially through membership of Parent Councils. We note also that the requirement for Local Authority Education Committees to co-opt three representatives of local faith communities is another important way in which minority communities are empowered to speak for themselves in the context of education governance.

This is particularly important outside the main conurbations, where members of small minorities do not have a local support group, but can only be supported through connection with others in their own community across geographic boundaries through a national network. In turn, this means that those responsible for school governance, at whatever level, need to be aware that they may need to engage with these national networks for advice and support in order to provide an adequate and equitable service to local members of minority communities.

7. How can the governance arrangements support more community-led early learning and childcare provision particularly in remote and rural areas?

Any such arrangements must take account of the needs of communities other than local neighbourhoods, such as ethnic, cultural, and faith communities.

8. How can effective collaboration amongst teachers and practitioners be further encouraged and incentivised?

While we are unclear precisely what the metaphor of “strengthening the middle” in this context is intended to convey, we are concerned that any concentration on the “middle” or “average” results in a neglect of, if not disregard for those with particular needs. The ethos of “getting it right for every child” implies equal concern for the needs of every child as an individual, and not even only as a member of a particular group. One important form of collaboration is therefore with organisations and networks representing minority communities that can assist teachers, schools, and others to ensure that issues are addressed appropriately.

9. What services and support functions could be provided more effectively through clusters of schools working together with partners?

Many of our concerns about the devolution of decision making to individual schools apply equally to clusters; indeed we are even more concerned about clusters because individual pupils from minority communities are likely to be even less visible when part of a larger geographic group. However, we would also reiterate that clusters need not only be from “within one locality” (p.11) but could be formed by

³ <http://gatheredtogether.bemis.org.uk>

twinning arrangements between schools in diverse locations and serving diverse populations. Such a model is something we would strongly welcome.

10. What services or functions are best delivered at a regional level? This may include functions or services currently delivered at a local or a national level.

We have experience of making resources available for schools by providing them to local authorities from which they can then be borrowed by individual schools. Any new regional structure would provide an opportunity to address concerns about teaching about diversity in a similar way.

11. What factors should be considered when establishing new educational regions?

As noted above “regions”, formed on geographical criteria, are not the only structure possible, and in fact non-regional twinings may be a more effective way of promoting diversity, and therefore of providing equity of provision.

However, we recognise that structures that cut across local authorities can sometimes cause problems in other contexts such as health and justice, and we therefore have reservations about the creation of both geographic and non-geographic educational regions.

12. What services or support functions should be delivered at a national level?

Given the diversity of both demography and geography, not just in Scotland as a whole, but even within individual local authorities, there must remain a role for national oversight bodies to ensure compliance with high-level policy aims. As regards delivery, some of the functions we have referred to as potentially being supplied at the regional level could as well be provided nationally, but the key national functions should be oversight and audit to ensure positive outcomes for every child.

13. How should governance support teacher education and professional learning in order to build the professional capacity we need?

By emphasising all of the issues we have referred to above in the context of both initial training and professional development.

14. Should the funding formula for schools be guided by the principles that it should support excellence and equity, be fair, simple, transparent, predictable and deliver value for money? Should other principles be used to inform the design of the formula?

We very much welcome the commitment to providing funding to “support excellence and equity – ensuring every child and young person has the same opportunity to succeed” (p.15).

Resources require to be allocated to where they are most needed to address these concerns; for example, whereas schools in urban areas generally are able to invite speakers from a wide variety of communities and visit the places of worship of a range of faiths, this is rarely possible for rural schools, so that budgetary provision

requires to be made for suitable substitute activities in order to ensure equity of provision.

15. What further controls over funding should be devolved to school level?

We do not wish to respond to this question.

16. How could the accountability arrangements for education be improved?

As noted above, the more autonomy is devolved, the more important it is to have effective audit and oversight mechanisms in place to ensure that that autonomy is not abused. This may require Education Scotland to be charged with specific oversight of these matters.

In addition, we would reiterate that schools should be accountable not only to local communities (p.1), but also to the communities in a wider sense to which their population may belong.

17. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding the governance of education in Scotland?

Families from minority communities can suffer additional detriment due to the urban-rural divide which we briefly referred to in response to question 5 above. The catalyst for our first *Being Jewish in Scotland* inquiry was the experience of a mother of a primary pupil at a small rural school with only two teachers. Her daughter was being bullied in the playground by other children who taunted her that “you killed Jesus”. When her mother went into the school to discuss the bullying, the teacher simply shrugged and said “Well you did, didn’t you”. In a large town, a parent in this situation would have had many options, but because it was a small village school, the mother felt unable to complain further because she feared a backlash from other local residents, amongst whom the teacher was very popular. There were no other Jewish families living nearby, and, despite her daughter’s natural distress, the mother felt too vulnerable due to her isolation to take the matter further. It is difficult to see what governance procedures could be implemented to address such issues while protecting such easily identifiable victims, but every effort must be made to ensure equity for all pupils and their families across the whole of Scotland.