

Education, not separation, must be SNP's focus as Ruth publishes new education plans

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The Scottish Conservatives are today publishing fresh plans to improve standards in Scotland's schools – and demanding Nicola Sturgeon focus on “education, not separation”.

As the SNP launches its election manifesto, Ruth Davidson will set out a detailed programme to improve Curriculum for Excellence, following warnings by leading experts that its roll out has led to a slump in core skills.

The Scottish Conservatives are also stepping up their attack on the SNP's broken promise to make education its “number one priority”.

Instead, Nicola Sturgeon has spent the last year putting her unwanted plan for a second independence referendum front and centre – and ignoring the day job.

The SNP's chaotic handling of education was underlined on Sunday after SNP MSP John Mason said Scotland had “moved on” from the need to focus on literacy and numeracy.

Today's paper is built on extensive consultation with schools, parents and business and makes recommendations in five key areas.

1. **Clarity, Accountability and Measurement**
2. **A Clear Focus on Core Skills**
3. **Teacher Numbers, Workforce Planning and Teacher Training**
4. **Reforming the Education Agencies** 5. **Extending School Autonomy**

Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson said:

“Nicola Sturgeon asked to be judged on education.

“Standards are down, there is a teacher shortage, we have a curriculum in crisis and our poorest children are being let down. The judgement is in and

it is damning.

“The truth is Nicola Sturgeon has made independence her number one priority.

“And while standards fall, her MSPs casually dismiss parents’ concerns by declaring we have ‘moved on’ from the need to teach literacy and numeracy.

“Scotland has had enough. Education, not separation, needs to be the focus now. “The SNP must act immediately – empty promises of jam tomorrow will not do.

“This paper sets out the simple, clear and vital reforms we need to see in our schools.

“But as long as the SNP bangs on about independence, our schools will suffer.

“This election is the last chance to send the SNP a message to get back to the day job. Only the Conservatives can stand up to them and only the Conservatives have the answers.

Scottish Conservative shadow education secretary Liz Smith said:

“The Scottish Government has been quick to remind us that, in its recent review of Scottish schools, the OECD applauded Scotland for having the foresight to put in place such an ambitious reform as the Curriculum for Excellence.

“That’s true, but the OECD also made clear that there was a long way to go before Scotland could live up to its full potential and realise excellence and equity right across the country.

“The Scottish Conservatives believe we owe it to every parent, teacher and young person to deliver that excellence and equity.

“Simply hoping things will improve is not an option.”

For a copy of the publication, visit:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/CfE-Interim-Report-FINAL.pdf>

On the morning of the SNP’s manifesto, the Conservatives are calling for radical improvements to the Scottish education system, with reforms focused on five key areas:

A Clear Focus on Core Skills

- The urgent priority within the Curriculum for Excellence must be to address declining numeracy and literacy standards
- Teaching of literacy and numeracy has to combine traditional methods

with good quality diagnostic assessment

- Broad general education should be reset so that its main focus is on traditional subjects and on the necessary core knowledge which defines them
- National 4 needs to be much more focused around the testing of basic skills and there must be a much better link-up with vocational training

Teacher Numbers, Workforce Planning and Teacher Training

- We need more investment in teacher numbers, especially in additional support for learning
- Routes in to teaching should be more flexible, with allowing teachers with non-Scottish qualifications to teach in Scottish schools with minimal restrictions
- A Scottish equivalent of TeachFirst should be introduced
- Postgraduate bursaries should be introduced, attracting talented graduates into key subjects, especially STEM
- Tests for trainee teachers to identify weaknesses in literacy and numeracy teaching should be introduced

Reforming the Education Agencies

- A reformed Education Scotland should be completely separate from an independent inspectorate and linked more effectively to SQA, government, local authorities and schools
- Schools should be free to make use of advice and CPD training available from independent bodies
- The Scottish Government needs to commission independent research which will provide regular, detailed and rigorous quantitative and qualitative analysis
- For the SQA, there must be better resourcing, more transparent decision-making which draws on teachers' classroom experiences, clearer lines of responsibility, much greater clarity of purpose and better communication with schools.

Extending School Autonomy

- Any straitjackets which prevent or discourage headteachers from using the existing powers they have should be removed
- Headteachers should be free to spend the money received from the Pupil Equity Fund as they think best without edicts from central or local government
- The extension of powers to headteachers should include greater power over staffing decisions

- The percentage of any school budget over which headteachers have direct control should be much higher
- Legislative changes should be considered to provide greater diversity within our schools

Clarity, Accountability and Measurement

- Curriculum for Excellence should be re-launched in line with its original principles but in a greatly simplified and clarified form
- Teachers should have access to short, concise and straightforward advice on content and standards for the main curriculum areas
- Scotland should once again participate in TIMSS and PIRLS and that SSLN should not be abandoned but reformed
- Standardised national testing needs to deliver a better understanding for schools and local authorities of national benchmarks
- There should be formal partnerships between colleges and schools and universities and schools

Over the weekend, SNP MSP John Mason made a series of remarks on social media suggesting standards of education don't really matter. He said society had "moved on" from the need to have literacy and numeracy skills, and that such skills weren't needed across a range of careers:

<https://twitter.com/JohnMasonMSP>