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Your Reference: Scottish Schools - data

10 November 2021

Dear Gerry,

Thank you for your letter of 26 October to the First Minister about the data available to the Scottish school system. As the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, I have been asked to reply.

I do not agree that there is a lack of reliable data on how well our young people are doing. The National Qualification results in 2020 and 2021 provide an accurate picture of the qualifications awarded to learners in those years. Comparisons with previous and future years is possible, provided it is done with an understanding of the different underlying assessment methodologies.

With regards to data available to the system for use in driving local improvement – there are no gaps here either. The 2021 data for Insight – the tool used by schools for improvement in the senior phase – was released as usual in September, therefore schools and local authorities continue to have data available to them to drive forward improvement activity tailored to their own context.

As a result of COVID-19 and the closure of schools in March 2020, the Scottish Government decided that it would not be appropriate for the collection of Achievement of CfE level (ACEL) data for 2019/20 to go ahead. However, ACEL data for primary schools has been collected for 2020/21 and the results will be available in December, and it will be possible to compare this with data from previous years.

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In your letter, you suggested rejoining both the PIRLS and TIMSS surveys. We are committed to ensuring that the burden placed on schools by central government is appropriate and proportionate. One way of achieving this is by rationalising Scotland's engagement with international surveys like PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS. Whilst PIRLS and TIMSS are well-regarded international assessment programmes, it is the view of the Scottish Government that PISA provides a more useful international measure to sit alongside our other evidence about the Scottish education system. PISA is the only international survey that includes a consistent set of comparator nations, with all OECD countries involved, as well as a substantial number of other countries. It also goes beyond assessing how well pupils have mastered a curriculum, to assessing pupils' knowledge and skills required for participation in society and everyday life.

You also suggested reintroducing the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy. As I announced on 27 October, we will be establishing a short-life sub-group of the Curriculum and Assessment Board to consider options for a sample-survey based approach to assessing progress across the four CfE capacities. Work on the membership and remit of that sub-group has begun, and it will be charged with making recommendations in March 2022. We will consider and agree next steps once we have seen the sub-group's recommendations. We do, however, remain absolutely committed to teacher professional judgement and the Achievement of CfE Levels data as the primary means of assessing progress in the Broad General Education. The commission for the short-life sub-group will make clear that such a survey must complement and enhance the data we already collect.

Finally, although national statistics provide helpful information on trends over the long term, there is an argument which has been raised with us previously by one of our International Council of Education Advisers, Pasi Sahlberg, that big data alone isn't what drives improvement in education systems. For that we need small data based on teachers' professional observations, formative assessments, and reflections of what is happening during teaching and learning. At a school level, teachers will still have the "small data" necessary to ensure they can assess the attainment of the children and young people in their classes and plan next steps appropriate for each individual.

Yours sincerely



**SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE**

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