

# Ensuring comprehensive schools continue to deliver for Scotland

## AGENDA

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ON October 27 1965, Willie Ross, the Labour Secretary of State for Scotland, told local authorities to stop using test results to select children for either junior or senior secondary schooling and to establish local comprehensive secondary schools where "young people will greatly benefit ... by spending the formative years of early adolescence in schools where the pupils represent a fuller cross-section of the community".

Segregation in schooling was wrong. Too many children were not being given the educational opportunities they deserved. Fifty years later, these comprehensive schools, attended by around 95 per cent of Scottish secondary-age pupils, are a "taken-for-granted" part of our social landscape.

There is a great deal to celebrate in what has been achieved. I, together with my colleagues at Edinburgh

University (Dr Linda Croxford, Dr Cathy Howieson and the late Professor David Raffe, who sadly passed away earlier this year) edited the book *Everyone's Future: lessons from fifty years of Scottish comprehensive schooling* to coincide with this birthday.

We analyse the available evidence and conclude comprehensive schooling has worked well for Scotland. In 1964-5, just 17 per cent of school leavers had passed at least one Higher. By 2014, this figure had risen to almost 60 per cent. Attitudes to school have also improved enormously.

But we outline a number of continuing challenges facing the comprehensive system. We identify three types of equality – opportunity, value and outcome. Comprehensive schools have opened up opportunities and aim to value all children equally. Pupils who might once have been marginalised are now full members of the moral community of the school.

Society expects schools to contribute to educational and occupational selection through competitive performance in examinations and children from advantaged backgrounds are much better placed to compete. The performance of children from the poorest sections of society has improved but their richer classmates' performance has improved even more.

We see the challenges facing comprehensive schooling as reflective of the challenges of democratic living more generally. We clarify and evaluate these challenges by using the foundational democratic values of liberty, equality and fraternity and illustrate the way in which these values can act to support, but also to constrain each other.

For example, our democracy values liberty over equality in the support we give to independent schooling and to placing requests, although there is unequal access to that choice. We question whether the increasing individualisation and choice (liberty) of the "senior phase" (for 15-18-year-olds) of Curriculum for Excellence may inadvertently increase inequality.

Comprehensive schools,

particularly those containing Mr Ross' "fuller cross-section of the community", have made a positive difference to "fraternity". There are very low levels of social segregation in Scottish state schools compared to other countries.

No-one who has worked in schools these past 50 years can doubt that, in general, children are more equally valued and supported now. Comprehensive schools today are vastly more humane, cohesive, supportive, tolerant, and open communities.

They do not, however, and cannot deliver a comprehensive education on their own. Others – FE, the voluntary sector, employers, training agencies, and parents and pupils themselves – play a part.

Too many of those who leave school before 18 slip through the cracks while trying to navigate the confusing array of available opportunities. We therefore encourage government to engage the wider civic community in a national discussion to renew the comprehensive vision and redefine the broad outcomes of Scottish secondary education for all – "everyone's future". We argue a leaving or graduation certificate at age 18, open to all, whether in school, FE, training or voluntary work, would structure and reward more fairly and equally the range of attributes, not just examination attainments, we want young people to acquire

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