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Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and
Education
Committee**

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Ymateb gan : Cymdeithas Genedlaethol y Prifathrawon (NAHT)

**Response from : National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT Cymru)
Implementation of Professor Graham Donaldson's Review Successful Futures:
Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales.**

NAHT welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Children, Young People and Education committee.

NAHT represents more than 29,000 school leaders in early years, primary, secondary and special schools, making us the largest association for school leaders in the UK.

We represent, advise and train school leaders in Wales, England and Northern Ireland. We use our voice at the highest levels of government to influence policy for the benefit of leaders and learners everywhere.

Our new section, NAHT Edge, supports, develops and represents middle leaders in schools.

The work of the Pioneer schools network in designing and developing the new curriculum;

NAHT Cymru and our members were heavily involved in the evidence that fed into Professor Graham Donaldson's review and in the shaping of the recommendations in Successful Futures.

Indeed, following the announcement of the acceptance of all 68 recommendations in late June 2015, NAHT Cymru stated,

“Successful Futures’ provides permission for the profession to take the lead and is the blueprint that should now shape the work of all interested parties - schools, Local Authorities, Regional Consortia, Estyn and the Welsh Government.

“NAHT Cymru are also pleased that there have been more realistic timescales indicated by the Minister. Lessons have to be learnt from less successful implementation of past initiatives. It's not about getting a new curriculum and assessment in place by a short term, specific date or time. It's actually more about getting it right, at the right time and keeping the needs of all learners at the heart of all we do.”

The examples of developments emerging from individual pioneer schools have appeared exciting and innovative and the schools and staff within them have made use of the time and space provided in order to begin devising outstanding practice.

The mechanism for wider communication of their work across Wales has been more challenging. NAHT Cymru have sought to assist via our own communications systems, but this method simply does not reach everyone. There is some suggestion that the sheer volume of initiatives and the 'business as usual' work at school level does not allow for easy dissemination.

Currently, many school leaders of settings not leading on curriculum and assessment development (non-pioneer schools) are struggling to understand how work in the pioneer schools is going to feed into their own school and impact upon the Wales-wide policy change that will be required. There appears to be a fundamental difference between 'encouraging' school-to-school working and actually constructing opportunities in order to 'facilitate' constructive school collaboration. NAHT Cymru hold the view that, for the greatest systemic-level of change, the greatest gains will be in those schools NOT directly involved in developing the new curriculum as without them on-board any inertia in the system will be exacerbated.

There is a sense that the high level vision, as expressed in 'Successful Futures', remains a useful yardstick for any new approaches but that there is now a need for greater clarity as to what the new curriculum and assessment system will actually look like to individual school leaders, teachers and the wider workforce. It should also be borne in mind that any staff employed since 1988 in schools in Wales will have known nothing other than a National Curriculum. The legacy of a prescribed curriculum will require a huge cultural shift within the profession – not insurmountable but a huge challenge nonetheless.

The aim now should be to better co-ordinate the overall shape and structure of the curriculum so that it can be articulated to schools, HTs, teachers, support staff and pupils and parents – 'Where are we now?' 'What will the overall structure look like?' 'How will schools be able to use the new structure?' 'What will be expected of schools and the workforce from now on?'

School leaders want to know how the various pieces of development currently under way will be brought together into a clear, structured and understandable curriculum for Wales. How will the desired learning continuum, from our youngest to our oldest pupils, function so that children and young people are supported to maximise their progress from pre-school to formal qualifications and beyond?

The way that schools are measured and held to account directly influences the work they undertake and certainly the areas that occupy their greatest focus. One of our members stated that they were excited about the review's potential to provide much needed re-invigoration to our system and place values back at the heart of education. However, they feared the whole process will fall apart because of the accountability measures that will be implemented alongside the curriculum. In the current climate and culture, they saw little value in designing curricula without knowing the assessment and subsequent accountability model that will underpin it.

School leaders welcome well structured, purposeful accountability.

Robust, fair and well-planned measures can steer the improvement pathway for an organisation and energise the workforce to strive for what matters. When it is well planned it develops the types of activities that focus on the right things and encourages the workforce to concentrate efforts on areas over which they have direct influence.

There is a real danger at present that some of the current ways of measuring school performance could actually stifle the pioneer school work and the other ways of working we wish to see in order to facilitate curriculum development. Unless accountability, and the assessment system that runs throughout the curriculum, are both updated and developed at the same time as the curriculum review, they will prove to be a serious obstacle in achieving the overall aims of 'Successful Futures'. Accountability arrangements shape school-level behaviour – Estyn have appeared to understand this in their new inspection arrangements for 2017 onwards, which maintain a robust edge whilst acknowledging their role in improving schools and supporting and encouraging a cultural change for staff.

For example, our members believe that School Categorisation, in the current form, narrows the focus of schools, school leaders and teachers and inhibits the type of school-level developments required to implement a world class curriculum. Despite the best intentions of Welsh Government, categorisation also continues to be shared with wider stakeholders in a format that allows the media to produce crude league-tables, and this unintended ranking of schools via colour-code perpetuates a system that does not encourage school-to-school collaboration. It is facilitated school-to-school collaboration that can spread the impact across Wales for pioneer schools.

If the disconnect between some settings, an unwanted bi-product of unintended school versus school accountability measures, grows and is also allowed to creep into the pioneer / non-pioneer school relationship, the success of the curriculum plans are under threat. It is critical to the success of any roll out that every school, across the whole of Wales, has a keen sense of their role and responsibility in implementing the new curriculum and assessment system.

The interface with effective professional learning for the education workforce and initial teacher education and training;

Effective professional learning can be a key driver of change and improvement. For example, a teaching professional who has an intrinsic sense of their value, is able to experience a tangible investment in their own professional development and is provided with the resources and responsibility for their own improvement, is far more likely to be highly motivated and productive.

Currently, the pressures of an often limited training resource available for many schools, the range and type of professional learning on offer and the sheer scale of policy change for schools to manage and implement, has resulted in a very mixed picture in terms of the interface with effective professional learning for the education workforce.

The traditional training course has been shown to have less of an impact on school-based practice than some of the peer-model activities. Some of the 'excellence in teaching' programmes, for example, develop exactly the type of in-school reflective pedagogy approaches that have been evidenced to impact most upon the progress and learning of children and young people. However, such programmes are intensive and require funding and austerity pressures have reduced the ability of the workforce to access the best programmes via school budgets.

Quality assurance of professional learning programmes can also be challenging for schools. It is sometimes difficult for providers to fully appreciate the specific school or individual professional context and tailor the professional learning for maximum impact. This is a difficult challenge for providers because it requires a bespoke approach that, in turn, requires significant information gathering and planning prior to

any training. The National Literacy and Numeracy Framework support programme, for example, sometimes failed to have the desired impact in schools as each setting was in a very different position and the approach was not necessarily tailored effectively or quickly enough to be able to impact on class-based activities even for settings who were well placed early on in the roll out.

Initial teacher education and training providers also need to be completely involved at the outset of the curriculum and assessment policy changes. Providers, with the assistance of the profession and particularly school leaders, need to be shaping courses to ensure new teaching staff are fully up to speed and able to develop a reflective pedagogy throughout their career from the very beginning. As new teachers enter the profession, schools will be expecting that newly qualified staff start fully aware of the principles and recommendations in 'Successful Futures'. School leaders take the responsibility for induction very seriously and will support new teachers within their settings. However, external professional learning can only become effective if developed within school during in-class experience – theory into continually refined practice. If we have well prepared newly qualified staff, they too can be a lever for cultural change in the system.

The 'excellence in teaching' programmes, previously referred to, require a specific reflective approach – almost like a 'teaching-hospital' approach – peers working together, collaboratively in school, observing, reflecting and refining their knowledge, attitudes and skills. In order for this to succeed it must lie outside existing performance management processes as a separate approach – for the teachers, led by the teachers.

A similar peer-led approach would be of great benefit to school leaders, particularly headteachers, who often remain in some isolation when trying to develop leadership skills. Many experienced Headteachers lament the loss of the LPSH programme for a similar reason. This model of peer-led professional learning is also more likely to produce the school-to-school working that could facilitate the roll out of the recommendations in the curriculum review. For school leaders to influence the level of change required for Successful Futures recommendations to be realised, they have to have strong peer-relationships, have a high degree of resilience and fully understand and buy-in to the vision that expects a mutual responsibility for all pupils, not just those in their own schools.

As a result of the recognised financial pressures of austerity, Welsh Government provided greater flexibility to school leaders in the use of certain grants included in the Education Improvement Grant. This was a welcome degree of support but has now inadvertently resulted in many cases where there is little if anything left for professional learning in school budgets, as the funds have been used up merely sustaining staffing levels.

If we are all committed to investing in the world class staff who will need to deliver the world class curriculum, we will need to commit funds to schools specifying that this additional allocated professional learning budget be ring-fenced for professional learning on top of existing school budgets.

Governance arrangements for implementation and the role of the Independent Advisory Board, Change Board and Strategic Stakeholder Group;

As Director of Policy – NAHT Cymru, I sit on the Strategic Stakeholder Group. The work of the group has been interesting and has shown the type of developments coming to fruition in a number of pioneer schools. We have also viewed the Digital

Competence Framework and other relevant developments within 'Successful Futures'..

However, there can be a sense that the stakeholder group feels quite removed from the process of developing an overall system. There is a fear that the pioneer school work has yet to be articulated into an overall curriculum plan and as a stakeholder, our influence is somewhat blunted. There is also a need to be clear about implementation, particularly how to manage changes so that it is clear to schools when new curriculum plans come in, exactly what they will replace so that certain current activities can stop to create the space for the new work to come into play. Current workload leaves no room for anything additional, only something that replaces existing practice.

NAHT Cymru have been committed to communicating to our members any updates regarding the curriculum plans and to request their feedback for the Strategic Stakeholder Group. Our aim has been to support this Welsh Government policy change and yet communication channels only seem to be received and understood by a proportion of schools. Some exploration of the most effective means for communication is required, a joint strategy between Welsh Government and the wider profession.

Although the Independent Advisory Board, Change Board and Strategic Stakeholder Group structure appears to make sense and align behind the pioneer school activity, it is not always clear how they interrelate and support the overall work of curriculum and assessment development at school-level. Many NAHT Cymru members at school-level would not really understand the role of the above groups or who sits on each group, or how each group is supporting the overall curriculum developments. A legitimate question might be, do all school staff need to know? However, it would make sense to provide a schematic for use in communications, particularly for school leaders but accessible to all, in order to establish the structures supporting the work at school level.

It is also unclear, at present, how much influence the above groups are having within schools. There is an argument that the expert academics involved in the governance arrangements would have a greater influence and support school leaders, teachers and other staff in pioneer schools if they were working more directly with them – is there a need or direct benefit in academics working directly with schools? We believe that their world-class knowledge and research-rich experiences would enhance the current work and further enhance the skills and knowledge of the Welsh education workforce as they shape the new curriculum.

Other issues of concern and/or importance regarding the development of the new Curriculum for Wales.

One of the key areas that was welcomed when the then Minister for Education, Huw Lewis AM, announced the acceptance of all 68 recommendations in 'Successful Futures', was the ambitious but pragmatic and realistic planning and timescales set.

Subsequently, there has been a bringing forward of certain deadlines.

The initial indications, gained from the Scottish experience of curriculum change, were that Wales would be looking at a timescale of at least 8 to 10 years. We welcomed this sensible and proportionate approach. However, the new arrangements are now due to be available from September 2018 – a mere three years from the start of the pioneer school work and well under two academic years

away. It is critical that the implementation is well managed and pragmatic – it must be about getting this right for pupils and not rushing in change to meet a deadline. There are implications for schools in terms of professional learning prior to roll out, ensuring the profession is ready and able to meet the challenges of the new and exciting curriculum and assessment arrangements.

Schools need to understand the overall timetable - what policy comes into practice and when, what teachers can then stop doing to allow the new approaches to be implemented effectively and who is responsible for gate-keeping to ensure the overall structure is coherent, that workloads are manageable and the profession is well prepared?

The current plans are exciting and ambitious but the profession and wider stakeholders require an overall blueprint with greater coherence to see how each element – curriculum, assessment and accountability – fits together and encourages the right, constructive ways of working. A clear strategy for pragmatic implementation, including a resourced duty upon every school to be involved in the pioneer work (directly or indirectly) clearly communicated to all settings and staff members would also provide the pathway expected for curriculum change.

In previous years, for example, when rolling out large educational policy, the Welsh Government have provided for two additional In-service Training days to schools, specifying exactly what the schools should do on those specific occasions. If this were to be repeated during the roll out of the new curriculum and assessment over the next few years, facilitated by government, consistent communication is more likely, professional learning related to curriculum and assessment changes could be relatively efficiently delivered and no school could say that they had no opportunity to get involved.

Finally, the assessment system could be a key element in levering the right type of change. The high level vision for assessment has been articulated but the current line of travel remains somewhat unclear. We welcomed the principles of enabling the profession to lead the changes, but school leaders are telling us that they need more detail so that accountability does not distort the purpose of in-class assessment.

We continue to emphasise the recommendation in Donaldson's 'Successful Futures' review to school leaders, about enabling assessment to fulfil its core purpose, by releasing it from the non-progress accountability measure that it appears to be at present. In Professor Donaldson's review, the recommendations concerning assessment, accepted in full by the Welsh Government, were unequivocal. Two are of particular note:

- Assessment arrangements should give priority to their formative role in teaching and learning.
- Local and national policies and practices for assessment should be carefully designed to be as light touch as possible, while giving sufficient information to assess progress, and avoid unnecessary bureaucracy.

Unfortunately, the widely accepted integral role of assessment in the learning process, as explained above, has been somewhat skewed by the over reliance by national, regional and local government on accountability measures that focus purely on pupil outcomes.

School leaders believe that there is a need to disconnect accountability from an outcome-only obsessed assessment framework and, instead, fully implement a system that adheres to the key principles in the review recommendations. We want a system which enables all schools, and those working directly with our children and young people, to focus upon their core purpose, maximising pupil progress and, as a result, achieving the best possible outcomes.

School leaders would be keen to work with government at every level in order to create a system where assessment is accurate and trusted, works to accelerate pupil progress and improves outcomes for every child and young person in Wales.

The main purpose of education is to prepare children and young people for a world we do not yet know and cannot fully anticipate. 'Successful Futures' recognised this and articulated it through the long-term vision.

Preparing for this unknown future means that for our children and young people core skills in communication, numeracy and digital competence are likely to remain important, but the most critical skill of all is likely to be being an outstanding learner.

By ensuring that we produce individuals well prepared and with the attributes, skills and perseverance to learn throughout their lives, resilient enough to withstand and overcome challenges and comfortable to innovate and explore creative solutions to problems, we will be placing pupils in Wales in a position of strength.

Rob Williams

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