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Convener, Education, Children and Young People
Committee
The Scottish Parliament
`By email: ecyp.committee@parliament.scot

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Dear Convener,

Thank you for your recent letter of regarding the Education, Children and Young People Committee's roundtable on violence in schools.

The issue of relationships and wellbeing in our schools is one of my top priorities in my role as Education Secretary.

Children and young people must have every opportunity for successful learning that is unhindered by disruptive behaviour. It is also important that teachers and school staff are able to work in a safe, welcoming and supportive environment. That is why I announced my intention to hold a relationships and behaviour summit, engaging with young people, parents and carers, schools, local authorities and union representatives to discuss how to tackle the problem.

In recognition of the complexities of the concerns being raised, a multi-stage approach to the summit is planned. This will ensure there is sufficient opportunity to engage directly on the issues raised at the Committee's roundtable. It was also allow for progress to be informed by the most up-to-date data following the publication of the Behaviour in Scottish Schools research later this year.

Our current plans are for summits to be held on the 5th of September, the 25th of October and the 15th of November, respectively.

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The Committee may find the following information helpful in response to the particular points you have raised:

Framing

I agree that the summit should be approached with a clear understanding of the scale and types of behaviours, both positive and negative, being experienced in our schools and classrooms. The approach to scheduling the summit ensures the final event can take account of the forthcoming Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research (BISSR), which will publish later in the Autumn. BISSR will provide us with a robust national picture in relation to behaviour in Scotland's schools, including trends over time. This reliable, up-to-date information will be key to formulating our policy response.

While recent reports of violence incidents are extremely concerning, I don't think they reflect the broader experience in our classrooms.

However, we have a generation of young people who have grown up with two years of disruption to their formal education and that will impact on relationships and behaviour in our schools. I am therefore clear that the summits should not focus simply on violence, but on relationships and behaviour as a whole. This approach will ensure we work towards identifying the solutions that will make the greatest difference to teachers and young people.

I am also clear that we need to ensure the summit process brings in a breadth of perspectives. I am committed to ensuring children and young people's voices are at the heart of this process, that their voices must be heard alongside those of teachers and parents. Officials have been engaging with the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, and the Scottish Youth Parliament about how to engage with children and young people appropriately and sensitively. Officials are also currently considering how best to bring in the community perspective.

Scale of the issue – data and reporting

It is important that the Scottish Government's future policy actions, including the development of new guidance and support, is informed by the best possible evidence of what is happening in our schools across Scotland. As noted above, we are currently gathering evidence that will help us better understand the extent of behaviour challenges at a national level through our Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research (BISSR). This is the fifth wave of the study, with surveys being conducted in 2006, 2009, 2012, and 2016. The ongoing nature of the research enables us to track trends over time. The committee will be aware that the fieldwork in 2020 and 2021 was delayed due to COVID.

The research explores teachers' and support staff's experiences of relationships and behaviour in publicly-funded mainstream schools, and includes both a national, representative survey of staff, and qualitative fieldwork. It will help to build understanding both of what behaviours are being seen in our schools, as well as trying to understand the underlying causes of those behaviours, and what further support teachers and school staff need. The research specifically explores the impact of COVID-19. This will ensure future policy, guidance and support for school staff reflects the challenges in our schools but also what is working well.

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In recognition of the concerns that have been raised around recording and monitoring incidents, this is to be the focus of the first summit on the 5th of September. This summit will include consideration of both process and barriers to recording, and will also look to consider how to support parents, pupils and teachers.

We expect schools and local councils to record all incidents of bullying and violence in schools. In 2019, we introduced a consistent and uniform approach to recording and monitoring incidents of bullying across all schools in Scotland. In response to Education Scotland's thematic inspection of the use of the recording and monitoring of incidents of bullying in schools, which found an inconsistent approach to the use of the national approach across Scotland, we have commenced a review of our anti-bullying guidance Respect for All. This review will be informed by discussions at the summit.

How to address this issue?

As a former teacher, I fully understand the challenges faced by the profession and the time and energy it can take in responding to disruptive behaviour. I think we should be proud that the foundation for our education system is an inclusive one which promotes positive relationships, learning and behaviour. Punitive approaches, particularly as children are still recovering from the trauma of the last few years, will not work. We get the best from our children when we make sure they have the support they need to meet their full learning potential.

I recognise that the disruption over the last few years has impacted on school culture and ethos. The focus of the summit on the 25th of October will therefore be on building positive relationships and behaviour approaches. I have already convened a head teacher taskforce which met in June and considered current practice around exclusion.

I note the point made in relation to communication needs, particularly those of children with additional support needs and will take this into account when addressing this issue as part of the forthcoming summit. We have in place an established action plan to respond positively to the concerns about support for pupils with additional support needs. The action plan includes specific actions to ensure that we draw these together and take account of the BISSR research in our implementation of that plan and vice versa.

In terms of resources to support teachers working with pupils with ASN, the Scottish Government has invested £15m per year in order to enhance provision of pupil support assistants. This has contributed to an increase of 2,803 support staff in schools since 2018. This is within the context of local authorities continuing to prioritise funding for additional support for learning within their budgets despite a challenging financial context. In 2022 local authority spend on ASL was £830m – the highest level of local authority spend to date.

The Scottish Government has increased annual funding to services that provide support advice and representation to parents, carers, children and young people on ASL by £219,000. This includes increased annual funding by £70,000 for ENQUIRE, who provide advice to parents and carers on additional support for learning. They help families and schools work together to ensure children get the support they need. Funding has also increased by £59,000 per year for ASL advocacy and legal representation services for parents, young people (16+) and by £90,000 per year for children (12-15).

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Regarding Educational Psychologist numbers, the Scottish Government and COSLA committed significant joint funding in 2018 to support the training of Educational Psychologists. Since this joint funding was introduced, the numbers of new trainees has increased significantly. 29 students joined the workforce in 2022 following completion of the MSc, and 30 in 2021. This compares to 12 in 2019. Overall numbers of Educational Psychologists, in terms of total FTE, has also increased each year. We are working closely with COSLA and all core stakeholders to ensure a sustainable training pathway for Educational Psychology in Scotland.

Role of the media and social media

I have previously raised concerns about the sharing of violent incidents online, and the potential for this to create a false narrative around behaviour. That so much of the current discourse around behaviour, including the Committee's own deliberations, focuses on violence is a reflection of this portrayal in the media and online. The insights that will be provided by BISSR will help us to better understand the day-to-day experiences of teachers, including the impact of low-level disruptive behaviour and disengagement, and give us a secure footing upon which to act.

Whilst regulatory responsibility for social media lies with the UK Government, the Scottish Government is very clear that providers have a responsibility to enforce their own policies on harmful online content. The First Minister wrote Chloe Smith MP, Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology on 9th May urging her to ensure the Online Safety Bill contains the powers to hold social media companies to account. Within that letter the First Minister particularly highlighted his concerns about the sharing of violent incidents involving young people online.

Our current update of Respect for All will be considering the current guidance around online bullying to ensure it reflect young people's experiences. As noted above, officials are currently considering how best to engage directly with children and young people as part of this process. I will ensure the role of social media and other media is considered as part of the summit.

I hope this information is helpful. I am happy to update the Committee on the outcomes of the respective summits in due course.

Finally, I remain committed to taking a partnership approach in responding to behaviour and relationships in our schools; this will be key to delivering the solutions that we need.

Yours sincerely,

JENNY GILRUTH MSP

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