

# Putting Learners at the Centre

## Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education

A summary report for children and young people in secondary school and college  
by Professor Kenneth Muir on behalf of the  
Scottish Government



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# A summary report for children and young people in secondary school and college

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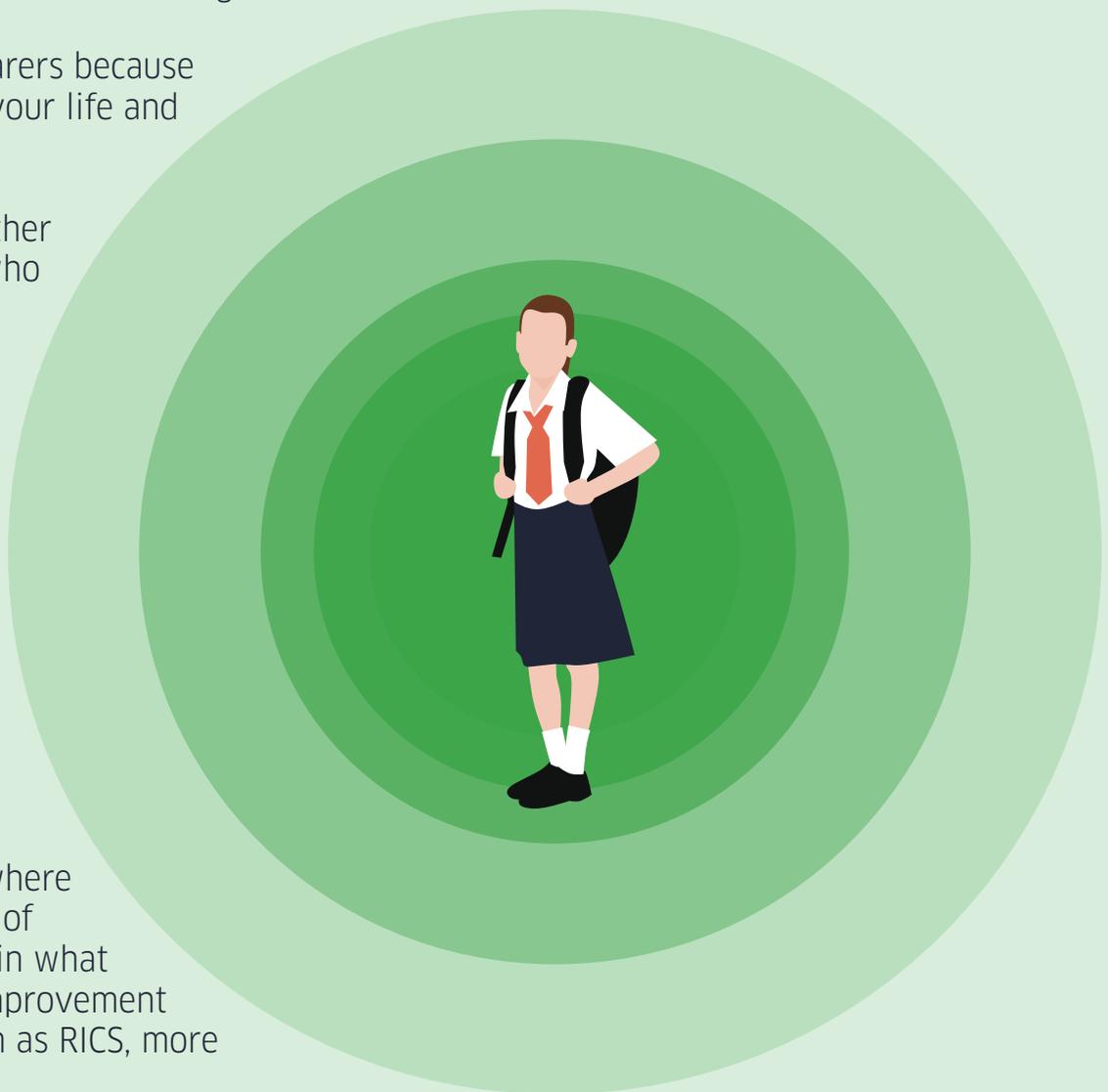
# Introduction from Professor Kenneth Muir

This report is for learners at secondary school or college. It gives information about the work I have recently completed that was about education reform.

My report is about changes to the education system. The education system is made up of different groups of people and organisations. These include:

- You, the learner, at school or college.
- Your parents and carers because they are involved in your life and learning.
- The teachers and other professional people who make big decisions in supporting your learning.
- Organisations that do work with schools and colleges like local community groups or national charities.
- Local Authorities (that's your local Council) who have a legal responsibility to manage the schools where you live. Also, groups of councils get together in what are called Regional Improvement Collaboratives (known as RICS, more on these later).

- National Organisations: In this report we talk especially about SQA the Scottish Qualifications Authority and Education Scotland. These organisations are a support to the whole education system.
- The Scottish Government and Scottish Ministers who make important decisions about what happens in schools and colleges.



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I was asked by the Scottish Government to look at what should replace the SQA and how Education Scotland should change with the removal of inspector from that organisation. But when I looked at these national organisations I also found it necessary to say things about other parts of the education system. One of the most important things I want you to understand when you read about what I am proposing, is that I am clear that any changes that happen must be made to make learning the best possible experience for you the learner.

Over the past months, as I did my work, I have listened to the views of learners. I asked children and young people what they thought about their experience of learning and school. In my report I want to make sure that learners understand that while I know that a lot of what goes on in school or college is good, I have also heard from learners who feel they are not having the best educational experience. This can be because they don't feel they are listened to, because they are not treated with respect, because they don't get the support they need, or because the school curriculum does not always suit their needs or the needs of all learners.

A big issue that I have heard about is that learning at secondary school, even in S1 to S3, is too focused preparing for and taking exams in S4, S5 and S6. This can even sometimes affect what is taught in P6 and P7 at primary school. After you read this report you might want to read my full report for the Scottish Government, it is [here at this link](#).

The Scottish Government has written a reply to my report which sets out what they are going to do next. If you want to read this reply it is [here at this link](#).

Thank you for your interest in my work.



Professor Kenneth Muir



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# Part 1.

## Curriculum for Excellence and the need for a national conversation about education

In his report Professor Muir has things to say about the curriculum and about Curriculum for Excellence.

What is the curriculum?

When we talk about the education system we need to know what is meant when we talk about the curriculum.

As a learner you are part of the education system from age three to 18. As a learner you move from early learning and childcare at nursery, then on to primary school, and then through to the end of secondary school and some young people go to college or university. It is important to remember that you continue learning throughout your entire life.

When you are a learner you have lots of different experiences. For example, you take part in lessons, there might be the chance to do other things like activities or clubs. These are part of the curriculum. Then, the curriculum is also all the other experiences you have in or out of school, like volunteering or going on trips. All of these things add up to be the educational experiences you have which is the curriculum.

Every school and community is different, but the idea of a curriculum is that learners have similar experiences across the country. Also, The curriculum is something that grows with you throughout your childhood: what you learn from all your experiences in nursery prepares you for primary; what you learn in primary prepares you for secondary; and what you learn in secondary prepares you for whatever journey you take after school.

### **Curriculum for Excellence**

Curriculum for Excellence is what we call our curriculum for children and young people aged 3-18. As a learner you are supposed to get the knowledge, skills, understanding and attributes you need for learning, life and work. You have probably heard in school that Curriculum for Excellence is all about helping children and young people to be successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.

### **Concerns and criticisms of Curriculum for Excellence**

Some people are critical about Curriculum for Excellence. In his report Professor Muir highlights some of these views.

So, some people in the education system:

- Feel that Curriculum for Excellence has lost its way. It is 20 years old now and

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not everyone understands what it means anymore. Also, the world has changed and so have children and young people – maybe they need to learn different things in new ways?

- Feel that teachers and learners should have more opportunity to create the curriculum together. They worry that Curriculum for Excellence has become too fixed and doesn't keep up to date with our changing world.
- Say there has been too much time spent on knowledge, especially in secondary school, so that young people pass exams. They say there should be a bigger focus on skills and attributes.
- Say it is time to re-think what we mean by being a responsible citizen. Children and young people will soon have the human rights that are described in the UNCRC enshrined in law. It is time to think about children and young people as equal citizens with rights who can and must have their say about their education. (There is more information about Article 29 of the UNCRC at the end of this report).
- Say it is time to put more focus on learning about sustainability, global citizenship and the climate.
- Say that there is too much focus on literacy and numeracy in primary schools and in doing so we sometimes forget the importance of focusing on health and wellbeing, and how successful learning links to this.
- Say that when it comes to S4, S5 and S6, it feels like at that point the experience of school becomes all about exams and that this is the only measure of a learner's success.

The ideas that Professor Muir has are about making Curriculum for Excellence the best curriculum for years to come. He suggests:

- Schools, teachers and learners need to have a strong say over the curriculum so that it meets community and individual needs.
- There is a need to give an equal focus to skills, and not just knowledge.
- Outdoor learning and play is important and in some areas there might not be enough of these.
- Encouraging even more youth workers, community groups and charities to get involved in schools and learning.
- That we need to think again about how we make Curriculum for Excellence something for all learners, from 3 to 18 years old. For the reasons mentioned earlier it feels like the last few years in school are too focused on getting knowledge and passing exams.
- In secondary school there needs to be more subjects or courses available including vocational not just traditional academic subjects. There should be provision of vocational and academic subjects no matter where you go to school.
- There should be more recognition of wider achievements of young people, not just subject/exam passes, and these achievements need to be better valued and recognised.
- We need to listen to what most learners want, and that is more continuous assessment, not just a final exam.

Professor Muir wants to see everyone in Scotland get involved in a national conversation about the future of education. He thinks this must include what you, as a learner, want from your experience of school and learning. And it must ensure everyone knows about the rights of the child.

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## Part 2.

# What needs to change?

## SQA (Scottish Qualifications Authority), Education Scotland including HM Inspectorate of Education

The main things Professor Muir talks about changing are about the national organisations SQA and Education Scotland that are a part of the education system. In this section there is information about what these organisations do just now and why they need to change.

It is unusual for all this to be explained to learners. Up until now most children and young people really haven't known anything about what these organisations do. In the past two years though, because of all the stress about exams and qualifications, it has become clear that learners need to know how these things work so that they can have a say and have their rights respected.

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# 1. SQA (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

## What does it do?

SQA is responsible for two things:

1. SQA is responsible for the qualifications you can get in school or college. It is responsible for designing and delivering qualifications, setting exams and marking and grading and awarding certificates. Every year around 136,000 school and college students take National Qualifications that would include Nat 4s, Nat 5s, Highers, Advanced Highers, Skills for Work courses and Scottish Baccalaureates. SQA will visit any place that offers qualifications to make sure they are providing assessments and exams properly. All of this is called SQA Awarding.

2. SQA is also responsible for making sure that they and other organisations that offer their qualifications do so properly. If they do then SQA says they can be trusted, it's like a badge of approval. For example, SQA makes sure that Scottish Vocational Qualifications or qualifications for Scotland's Modern Apprenticeships are offered properly. All of this is called SQA Accreditation.

## Why does it need to change?

The SQA does a very important job, preparing exams and delivering qualifications. SQA qualifications are highly respected and recognised all around the world. There are things that SQA does well, however some people feel that some of the things that SQA do could be done differently to make things better for learners and teachers.

In particular, many people feel that its culture i.e. the way it views and interacts with learners and teachers could be better. It has been suggested that the SQA should listen to, and take account of the views of learners much more when making their decisions. Some teachers also feel that SQA should listen to them more before making decisions about exams.

This feeling was heightened during Covid when there was a lot of disruption to schools, learning and to exams. Some learners, parents and teachers were unhappy with the arrangements put in place when holding exams in the traditional way was not possible, and the fact that lots of changes were made but with very little notice.

Another area where some people think SQA could do things differently is in how it promotes non-academic subjects. Some people think that SQA focuses too much on academic subjects. This can mean that vocational qualifications and other awards it offers are seen as being less important.

Another complex issue is the role of SQA Accreditation. In some countries qualifications and accreditation are in separate organisations and some people think that this is a better arrangement. There is more about this in Professor Muir's report.

Sometimes when attitudes and ways of doing things are in an organisation for a long time there needs to be big changes to make things different.

The Scottish Government decided that the SQA needed to be replaced before Professor Muir started his work, so he had to consider what to replace it with.

## What is Professor Muir saying should happen?

He is saying that some parts of what SQA does should be part of a new organisation called Qualifications Scotland. Mostly this will be the bit called SQA Awarding. And the other part (SQA Accrediting) should move to a national agency for Scottish education. More on that in the next section of the report.

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## 2. Education Scotland

### What does it do?

The purpose of Education Scotland is to improve the quality of education, so to make sure that teaching and learning are always improving. It does these things:

- It provides learning for teachers and headteachers and other professional people involved in education.
- It has a job to improve the curriculum, making sure that all learners are included.
- It support schools to improve digital learning.
- Although it covers the whole of Scotland it also works more locally in what are called Regional Improvement Collaboratives. There are 6 of these in Scotland. RICS help to bring together teachers and other professional people from across different council areas, to share ideas and find ways to improve the experience for all learners, across Scotland.
- Education Scotland is also the home for what is called Her Majesty's Inspectors. The Inspectors visit early years centres/nurseries, schools and colleges and community work and youth work services to make sure they are of good quality. When they do an Inspection they talk to staff, learners, parents and carers, and any local partners that they are involved with like local community groups. At the end of the inspection visit, a report of findings is produced which grades the school in different aspects such as leadership, learning and teaching, highlighting strengths and identifying areas for schools to improve.

### Why does it need to change?

At the moment Education Scotland is the home of support for schools; but then it is also the home of Inspection. Many people feel that these two things might be done better if they were in separate places.

Also, some people feel that it isn't clear who is looking after and leading on Curriculum for Excellence and who is providing support for teachers and schools. Because schools and learners have had such a difficult two years some people feel unsupported by Education Scotland. Professor Muir heard that some schools and subjects get good support but others don't, so it's a bit patchy. He said that there is definitely a need for more training and support for support staff and staff in early learning centres and nurseries.

Professor Muir found that some people don't know who is making decisions about the direction of education in Scotland. There is confusion about what Education Scotland is responsible for and what it does, compared to what Scottish Government is responsible for and what it does.

When it comes to Inspections, Professor Muir heard that Inspections can sometimes feel like a school is being judged rather than helped. Schools say that getting ready for an Inspection is too much work, it gets in the way of what they need to be doing day-to-day. He also heard that Inspections need to be more supportive and help teachers and schools improve.

### What is Professor Muir saying should happen?

In his report, Professor Muir says there are good things about the work Education Scotland does, an example is the increase in online training for teachers. Professor Muir also said that Education Scotland is getting better at working with local councils and the Regional Improvement Collaboratives we mentioned earlier. However, he says that it is time to set up a national agency for Scottish education that will look to keep what is going well and sort some of the problems identified. More on that in the next section.

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## Part 3.

# What does Professor Muir want to do?

Professor Muir is recommending that there should be three national bodies that support the education system. The changes he wants are being suggested so that the education system is better for learners. This section says more about the changes that Professor Muir wants to see. He recommends setting up these national bodies:

### **Qualifications Scotland**

**A national agency for Scottish education**

**HM Inspectorate of Education**

If you want to know what recommendations are being accepted you can read the Scottish Government's reply to Professor Muir's report.



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# 1. Qualifications Scotland

## **What will it do?**

This new organisation will replace SQA. It will be responsible for the design and delivery of qualifications. It will also be in charge of examinations and awarding of certificates.

An important job will be to rebuild the trust and confidence of learners, parents and carers, employers and teachers when it comes to the assessment and examination system. Professor Muir feels that trust and confidence has been lost during the Covid pandemic because exams and results were not handled as well as they should have been.

## **How is this different?**

Professor Muir says that Qualifications Scotland needs to involve learners and teachers more than the old SQA did.

The past two years have shown that qualifications and assessments need to be more flexible to circumstances like the pandemic. There also needs to be better ways to find out what learners, schools, colleges and employers want to see. We also need to be better at using digital technology in assessment and exams. The Scottish Government has asked Louise Hayward of Glasgow University to look at what needs to be changed with regards to qualifications and assessments.

## **How will this be better for you the learner?**

In the past couple of years with all the impact of Covid on learning and exams it was the case that young people, their parents and carers and teachers often felt they were not listened to and could not influence decisions. This new organisation must have ways to communicate with learners, parents/carers and teachers. It must be clear that anything it decides or does is because it is putting the needs and rights of children and young people at the centre of our education system.

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## 2. A national agency for Scottish education

### **What will it do?**

This organisation will build on the work currently done by Education Scotland and education departments within local councils on learning and teaching, and curriculum and assessment. It will be responsible for providing support to everyone across the education system so that we can see improvements in learning, from nursery through primary school to secondary school.

As well as schools, this organisation will support Community Learning and Development (CLD), this includes youth work, to be the best it can be. It will also make sure that our education system is doing the best it can for Gaelic speaking communities, those from minority ethnic communities and learners with additional support needs.

An important part of the support that will be provided is learning for teachers and other professional people that are involved in your learning. This includes providing support to teachers, headteachers and others on leadership.

This organisation needs to make it easier for schools and teachers to understand what support is available for them, and they should be able to ask questions and get help they need when they need it.

It will look at how your journey as a learner can be better planned and what you achieve is better recognised. It will also be responsible for making sure that organisations that offer qualifications do so properly. This will include checking on some

of the qualifications provided by the new Qualifications Scotland organisation (this is currently done by the SQA).

This agency will also collect information and ideas from learners, parents and carers, employers, teachers and others on any changes that they think need to be made to the curriculum, learning and teaching, assessment, and what is included in exams. This will help it give good advice to the Scottish Government.

### **How is this different?**

Professor Muir wants this organisation to be well connected to the views of everyone in the education system. He also wants it to find and share research and knowledge from around the world so that Scottish education learns from others.

This organisation must make sure that we are better at digital participation and learning.

It will also learn from the experience of the pandemic and make sure we have a modern and flexible curriculum and assessments that are not so focused on end of year exams.

### **How will this be better for you the learner?**

This organisation must have ways to communicate with learners, parents/carers and teachers. It must be clear that anything it decides or does is because it is putting the needs and rights of children and young people at the centre of our education system.

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### 3. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education

#### **What will it do?**

Her Majesty's Inspectors will no longer be part of Education Scotland. A new organisation HM Inspectorate of Education will be responsible for going to early learning centres, schools, community learning settings and other places where education takes place to find out about the quality of the educational experience that learners have.

The new HM Inspectorate of Education will be completely independent from the other national agencies that are being set up.

It will encourage more sharing and talking and learning across different ELC centres, schools and colleges. The learning that comes out of Inspections can be shared with the other national agencies, Government and schools themselves.

Professor Muir suggests that HM Inspectors are asked to report to the Scottish Parliament every year so everyone is aware of the state of education in Scotland. They will also report on longer-term trends in Scottish education.

#### **How is this different?**

The new HM Inspectorate of Education will have a different approach. Inspection will be about helping schools and other education providers. Inspections should feel less like someone is coming to judge and criticise them. Instead the Inspectors will encourage teachers, learners, parents and

carers and the partners who work with a school to reflect on what is going well, what could be better and how everyone can take responsibility to make it better.

The new approach to Inspection will make sure that children and young people are at the centre of what happens during an Inspection at a school or college. Inspectors should spend time with learners and provide different ways for them to get involved in Inspections.

Professor Muir also heard in his work that Inspectors should do more visits that are unannounced, that means the school or college doesn't know the Inspectors are coming. He heard this would mean Inspectors would get a more realistic view about the experience of learning there. This is something he says the new Inspectorate should consider.

#### **How will this be better for you the learner?**

You will have more of a say as a learner when your school or centre is inspected. Everyone that is part of the Inspection should be able to have their say knowing that it is all about making things better, not just being critical. It must be clear that anything it decides or does is because it is putting the needs and rights of children and young people at the centre of our education system.

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## Part 4.

# What else is going on that learners should know about?

Professor Muir highlights that there are two pieces of work that learners need to know more about, and make sure they are involved in. These aren't things we can go into in too much detail here.

### The future of Careers Services

The Scottish Government's Young Person's Guarantee says that everyone between 16 and 24 will have the opportunity to access support that will help them into fair employment including work experience, further or higher education, apprenticeships or other training programmes, formal volunteering or a supported activity programme.

Skills Development Scotland is responsible for most of the careers advice and support that learners get at school or college. A Career Services Review has happened recently. In his work Professor Muir said that not enough people knew this was happening and they might not know what is being suggested about the future of the careers services young people get.

There is a report on the review that you can see here if you want to [find out more at this link.](#)

The future of National Qualifications  
National Qualifications are Nat 4s, Nat 5s, Highers, Advanced Highers, Skills for Work courses and Scottish Baccalaureates. Every year around 136,000 young people are put forward for these qualifications.

The issues with exams and qualifications over the past two years of the pandemic have shown that things need to change. The Scottish Government has asked Professor Louise Hayward from Glasgow University to review and make suggestions as to what changes we need to make to national qualifications and exams. Professor Hayward is only just starting and will say soon how she will be involving learners in her work.



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## Part 5.

# What are the most important things for you, the learner, from Professor Muir's work?

Setting up the organisations talked about in this report is really important. In his report, Professor Muir talks about how the experience of being a learner should change if children and young people are to have the best educational experience. Remember, your experiences from nursery to primary to secondary school and beyond are supposed to give you the knowledge, skills and attributes you need for learning, life and work.

At the moment, according to Professor Muir, it can feel like learners are just one of the list of groups who are part of the education system and sometimes not everyone gets to have their voice heard. As well as the changes that we have already described, this section lists the big issues and themes that Professor Muir is suggesting Scottish Ministers consider so that you, the learner, can be at the centre of the education system:

- With so much changing in our world, Scotland needs to look ahead and have a big national conversation about what we all want and need from our education system in the future. Everyone should take part, as equals.
- This has become even more important because of the experiences we have had over the past two years. There has been a

lot of disruption to learning, stress about exams and we know that children and young people have experienced negative impacts on their health and wellbeing.

- Very soon the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) will be the law. The UNCRC describes what education should be like and so from now on everything we do to change and improve the education system must follow the rights of children and young people as they are described in the UNCRC. In particular, Article 29 talks about the purposes of education. Children, young people and adults in the education system need to know what the UNCRC says about education. There is more about this in the final section of this report.
- As well as rights, we need to remember that learning is all about relationships. So children, young people and teachers need to build trust so that learning can be as helpful and enjoyable as possible.
- Children and young people have told Professor Muir that climate change is one of the most important issues in their lives and futures. Professor Muir agrees that the curriculum should have a clear focus on learning about the climate, sustainability and the environment. This should be from early years, through primary school through to secondary school and beyond.

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- Learners from families or communities that experience more poverty than others find it harder to do well in our education system. This is not true for everyone, but if you look across the whole population of children and young people you can see there is inequality. Professor Muir thinks this continues to be a big problem and it is something the whole education system should work even harder to change.
  - Our education system must be a place where learners from all communities feel welcome and supported to achieve. This means that our education system has to care about equality and tackle sexism, misogyny, racism, homophobia and discrimination against people with disabilities.
  - We need an education system that properly and fully meets the needs of learners with additional support needs and disabilities. For too long this has not had enough attention and resources. Learners with additional support needs and disabilities must have their rights to an education respected equally.
  - No matter how much we change big organisations what matters is that every teacher is supported and doing their best, so that every learner is seen as an individual and can do their best. The education system needs to remember it is all about making sure teaching and learning are as good as they should be.



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## Part 6.

# What does the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child say about your education?

In 2021 the Scottish Parliament unanimously passed a bill which will incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots law. This means that every right of every child in Scotland must be protected, respected and fulfilled as set out in the UNCRC.

The UNCRC applies to everyone under the age of 18. It says children and young people should grow up in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity. The UNCRC describes what education should be like and so from now on everything we do to change and improve the education system must follow the rights of children and young people as they are described in the UNCRC. In particular, Article 29 talks about the purposes of education.

### ARTICLE 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:
  - (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
  - (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
  - (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
  - (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
  - (e) The development of respect for the natural environment.

To help Professor Muir in his work Children's Parliament, SYP and Together asked learners in secondary school to consider whether their education experience reflects the promises made in Article 29. If you want to read what learners said on this you can [read more at this link](#).

You can see in the earlier sections of this report that Professor Muir is saying that everything we do to change and improve the education system must follow the rights of children and young people as they are described in the UNCRC.

# Putting Learners at the Centre

Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education  
by Professor Kenneth Muir on behalf  
of the Scottish Government

