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Press Release – A CHALLENGING EDUCATION FOR CHALLENGING TIMES

Scottish independent schools highlight their “Commitment, Contribution and Collaboration” in education at AGM – and call on new Scottish Parliament and Government to give schools and pupils time and space to succeed.

As the fourth mandate of the Scottish Parliament grows closer, the body representing independent school education in Scotland, SCIS, has highlighted the “incredible contribution” those schools are making against a backdrop of almost constant change. At its annual general meeting in Edinburgh, to be held a week before Scottish elections, it calls on all parties to give a raft of reforms time to bed in and schools, pupils and parents the freedom they need to succeed.

Speaking at the event, SCIS Director John Edward will praise the impact independent schools are making in difficult economic times, and congratulate them on the diversity and excellence in education they are offering.

“The financial climate is an enormous challenge for families, teachers and schools – but one that, to date, our sector has met with confidence, pragmatism and innovation. Coming at a time of almost unprecedented change in education, the combination of circumstances is a challenge for the whole sector – a challenge which it is determined to meet. A new 5-year mandate for MSPs and the Scottish Government should be used to allow recent reforms to be taken on board, and provide a rare period of peace and continuity for the sector as a whole.”

Alongside the Curriculum for Excellence and impending new National Qualifications, to which independent schools have contributed a disproportionately high amount in the development stages – school-age education in Scotland is undergoing change at many levels, via:

- The “Donaldson” Review of Teacher Education;
- The ongoing “McCormac” Review of Teacher Employment;
- The ongoing “Doran” Review of Learning Provision for Children and Young People with Complex Additional Support Needs;
- The creation of a new Scottish Education Quality and Improvement Agency;
- A new Schools Inspection Framework for Scotland;
- Curriculum, qualification and governance changes elsewhere in the UK;

In addition to these, and the lack of clarity over the future funding of tertiary education in Scotland, there are wider changes in Scotland and the UK which will have a significant impact of families as they plan ahead for education:

- Lord Hutton’s proposals for reform of public sector pensions;
- UK Government changes to child, student and skilled worker visas;
- Ministry of Defence reforms to Continuity of Education allowance;
- The freezing of Child Benefit and reduced access to the Child Tax Credit;
- A new 3-year plan and reporting mechanism for OSCR – the Scottish Charities Regulator.

In light of all of these changes, SCIS will advocate a range of adjustments to public policy which would help free up the sector to spend more time on what it does best – excellence in teaching, learning and overall pupil experience. For example:

1. Teacher education and teacher retention

The Review of Teacher Education, accepted by the Scottish Government, makes many commendable proposals for reform – from degree level and induction, through continuous CPD to school leadership. A Scottish independent school should be considered for one, or more, “hub” teaching schools under the proposed changes.

Following Lord Hutton’s report on public sector pensions, the Scottish Teachers’ Superannuation Scheme should remain open to all teaching staff in Scotland, to ensure mobility and parity within the teaching profession.

2. Inspections

Both principal school inspection bodies in Scotland, HMIE and the Care Commission, have undergone substantial institutional change in recent months. SCIS supports the idea of a link team within the school inspectorate to ensure professional engagement and understanding over time, and would welcome a similar model for SCSWIS with boarding and special needs schools.

3. Independent provision of additional support needs

In order to bring clarity to the national provision of additional support needs in education, the Government should consider the possibility of an independent referral body which would allocate children and young people to appropriate places in special schools, based on need, whether schools are independent, grant-aided or under local authority control. Such a body would also coordinate the funding for those placements, which should be guaranteed for the duration of a child or young person’s placement, or until they are able to return to full time mainstream education. This standardised approach to commissioning and referral should be augmented with one national set of forms for schools and for pupils, and an agreed set of criteria on which to judge placement decisions, given the particularly complex set of needs which independent special schools manage.

- 4. UK Visas**

SCIS welcomes the automatic addition of “Highly Trusted Status” to independent schools as pupil sponsors, and calls on the UK Government to introduce a child student visa to cover school pupils for their entire school career.
- 5. National Qualifications**

SCIS calls for the Scottish Qualification Authority’s proposed timetable for new national qualifications to be adhered to without delay, and for future reform of Highers and Advanced Highers to be measured, modest and widely consulted.
- 6. Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator – Corporate Plan**

SCIS notes with disappointment that in its draft Corporate Plan for 2011-2014 OSCR continues to identify independent schools as ‘high-risk’ charities under its risk-based approach. SCIS is confident that the enhanced awareness and understanding of the sector which was afforded by the Rolling Review will provide assurance to OSCR that independent schools do not present a substantially greater risk than other higher-income charities. Emerging trends in increased financial assistance, increased number of beneficiaries and enhanced non-charged-for benefits provided by the schools constitute grounds for reducing their ‘risk status’.
- 7. Staff anonymity**

SCIS supports the Association of Teachers and Lecturers in its call for anonymity for school staff while suspended under ongoing investigation – to avoid pre-judgement of investigations and reduce vexatious complaints.
- 8. Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland (SCSWIS)**

The new SCSWIS has commenced work and will be setting national performance indicators and targets. As part of this process, SCSWIS should seek to provide a national benchmark in quality grades to boarding schools and special needs schools providing a School Care Accommodation Service, in order to alleviate concerns over regional disparities in quality grades.
- 9. GLOW**

Collectively, independent schools in Scotland are not part of the GLOW learning environment – a publicly-funded online resource. As such, resources placed there such as draft Curriculum for Excellence and National Assessment resources are not open to use and peer review by the sector’s 3,500 teaching staff. Following the creation of the new Quality and Improvement Agency and the move towards a second generation GLOW by 2012, SCIS calls for access to GLOW for all school staff in Scotland, or alternatively, a division between the pupil and teacher resources available there.
- 10. Ministry of Defence**

The Review of Continuity of Education Allowance must recognise the substantial presence of HM Forces’ families at Scottish independent schools, and the absence of any state-maintained boarding provision in Scotland.

Editor's notes:

1. SCIS is an independent, educational charity (Scottish Charity No. SC018033) representing over 70 member schools in Scotland, which educate more than 32,000 children of mixed abilities from diverse backgrounds. SCIS promotes choice, diversity and excellence in Scottish education. See www.scis.org.uk.
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