

**PE1668/E**

Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education submission of 14 December 2017

I am writing in response to the Committee's request of 13 November seeking the Scottish Government's views on Petition PE1668: Improving literacy standards in schools through research-informed reading instruction.

Building strong literacy skills among our young people is clearly pivotal to closing the poverty-related attainment gap in Scotland. Literacy, numeracy, and health and wellbeing are central to Curriculum for Excellence. Data on attainment levels in literacy show that improvements must be made. I have therefore given serious consideration to the points raised by the petition.

As I explained in my previous correspondence to the petitioner, Curriculum for Excellence is a teacher-led approach to learning. Our curricular approach is deliberately non-prescriptive, recognising that children learn in different and unique ways and that it is for empowered practitioners and teachers to decide the teaching methods which are most appropriate for individual children. As such, prescribing any single approach to learning and teaching runs contrary to the principles and framework on which the curriculum is based.

It is important in this context that teachers are taking research-informed approaches, tailored to the needs of individual learners. Teachers are best placed to match strategies to children's needs and Curriculum for Excellence empowers them to make these professional judgements. Education Scotland supports schools and teachers to use evidence-based practice in their classrooms through its Attainment Advisers and the National Improvement Hub.

I have also invited Education Scotland to develop a new self-evaluation framework to support the universities that provide initial teacher education to evaluate their work. It will be designed to support teacher education universities in identifying what is working well, including highlighting features of their own highly-effective practice. It will also help us recognise and develop a shared understanding of what we need to do collectively to secure improvements. The framework will be developed in partnership with teacher education universities and the General Teaching Council for Scotland given their responsibility for course accreditation. It will focus on the quality of learning and teaching within initial teacher education and key priorities, including literacy, numeracy health and wellbeing as well as Additional Support Needs which continues to be a key area of debate in terms of teacher skills. The framework will be available in time for universities to start this work during academic year 2017/18.

As I have stated to the petitioner, I agree that teaching phonics is an important part of learning to read, but that it is only one part of the approach to learning to read and systematic synthetic phonics is only one of a range of phonics approaches. The view endorsed by the Education Endowment Foundation is that it is more effective to match phonics teaching to the needs of individual children. While there is evidence to say that teaching phonics systematically helps children learn to read, there is debate among academics as to whether the synthetic phonics method is better than other methods. Indeed, I understand that Prof Sue Ellis and Dr Terry Wrigley have expressed reservations about the petition. As such, I am not convinced it would be helpful to prescribe one particular approach to teaching reading.

The Committee has asked for this position to be set in the context of Michael Russell's view in 2010 when he was Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning that synthetic phonics has had considerable success. This comment was part of an answer to a parliamentary question (S3O-8960) about promoting formal teaching of synthetic phonics. His response was:

"I agree that synthetic phonics has had considerable success. Many good teachers and lots of good schools are using the approach. However, it is important to stress that it is not the only approach. In certain circumstances, other approaches work well, in addition to or in place of synthetic phonics."

In context, his comments were not dissimilar to the position I have set out.