

MINUTE
of
EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Minute of meeting, held at 10.00am in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Giffnock on Thursday 9 November 2023.

Present:

Councillor Andrew Anderson (Chair)
Councillor Kate Campbell
Councillor Colm Merrick
Councillor Owen O'Donnell (Leader)
Councillor Danny Devlin

Councillor Katie Pragnell (Vice Chair)
Ms Fiona Gilchrist
Ms Dorothy Graham
Mr Des Morris
Ms Evelyn Yedd

Councillor Anderson in the Chair

Attending:

Mark Ratter, Director of Education; Janice Collins, Head of Education Services (Performance & Quality Improvement); Joe McCaig, Head of Education Services (Provision); Siobhan McColgan, Head of Education Services (Equality and Equity); Graeme Hay, Senior Manager Leading Change (Education); Colin Sweeney, Democratic Services Manager; John Burke, Committee Services Officer; and Leslyann Burns, Assistant Committee Services Officer.

Also Attending:

Alasdair McDonald and Jem Thomson together with pupils from Maidenhill Primary School; and Sara Jenkins with pupils from St Ninian's High School.

Apology:

Councillor Gordon Wallace.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

660. There were no declarations of interest intimated.

CHAIR'S WELCOME AND OPENING REMARKS

661. The Chair welcomed all present to the meeting and said it had been excellent to have seen the latest technology set up in the Members' Room prior to the meeting and to also have seen so many pupils and staff there.

DIGITAL LEARNING AND TEACHING STRATEGY 2024 TO 2027

662. The Committee welcomed representatives from Maidenhill Primary School and St. Ninian's High School and invited teachers and pupils to share their experiences of working with digital learning and teaching.

Jem Thomson, Teacher at Maidenhill Primary School, was joined by two primary 7 pupils to show how they innovatively use technology in the school and nursery classes. She advised that the school had access to a wealth of resources and platforms which children used during lessons and lunchtime clubs to develop their skills as part of the digital culture. Support was provided to parents and carers to help them support their learners at home by offering hands on parent workshops at the school. Digital platforms were also used for communication with parents and carers including via twitter and classroom blogs to keep them up to date with what was happening within the learning environment. Pupils provided additional information about their digital experience which included pupils of all ages learning how to code; using chromebooks to code and make games; taking part in a coding day with Morgan Stanely; and using software including Micro:bits, tinkercad and lego education. In addition, a lunchtime girls engineering club had been established to encourage girls to think more about the world of engineering and this included guest speakers, including a software engineer; making code; and learning about 3D printing

Sara Jenkins, Computing Teacher at St. Ninian's High School, referred to the "Dress Code" lunchtime club which had been set up specifically to encourage females into computing and to address the gender gap in computer science. She introduced 3 pupils who were involved with the club to provide more detail about the club and their role in it.

Pupils reported that the club was aimed at S1-3 females to offer a pathway to computing. The club now had over 40 members, with a number of S4-6 pupils attending to mentor younger pupils with a variety of tasks, including programming. Members of the club had been involved in competitions both internally and externally, including a recent contest to devise Halloween themed games. Mentors helped both high school pupils and pupils in local primary schools and had been invited to presentations on a number of subjects including modern and graduate apprenticeship schemes; and taking part in a tour of the new Barclays building. Mentors provided encouragement and advice to younger pupils and the number of female pupils opting to choose computing had increased. They highlighted that computing was not necessarily a solitary pursuit but included group communication, sharing expertise, and developing skills together. Sara Jenkins added that the success of the club was mainly as a result of the enthusiasm and expertise of senior mentors and it wouldn't work the same without them.

Members congratulated both sets of pupils and teachers for providing detailed presentations and further information on the excellent work being carried out in this area in both the primary and secondary sector, as an example of the work being undertaken across schools and nurseries throughout East Renfrewshire, and in particular the work being undertaken to encourage females into the areas of computing and technology.

Thereafter, the Committee considered a report by the Director of Education, providing an update on the evaluation undertaken of the Education Department's previous digital learning and teaching strategy and seeking approval for the new digital learning and teaching strategy 2024 to 2027. The Education Senior Manager (Leading Change) highlighted the evaluation undertaken of the previous strategy, which had been extended as a result of the pandemic, noting that consultation with stakeholders had been central to the development of the new strategy. He went on to outline the vision of the new digital learning and teaching strategy,

based around three key aims: digital access; digital learning and teaching; and digital leadership, with associated activities for each.

The Education Senior Manager further highlighted that the strategy could not be viewed in isolation and it was important that it was viewed both within the context of the wider work of the Education Department, as well as work across the Council, specifically noting the importance of partnership working with the Council's IT Service to deliver on these ambitions. Thereafter, he highlighted that there had been a formatting error in the strategy advising that within the digital access theme, the final line should read: "Promote and facilitate inclusion and accessibility for all learners and their families, particularly those who are at risk of educational disadvantage and those who have additional learning needs.", and this would be amended for the final published version of the strategy.

Councillor Buchanan welcomed the strategy indicating that digital provision was part of the future of education to ensure that pupils and teaching staff had the right skills and supports to move forward in this area. However, he added that there could be some negative impacts of technology, including in relation to Artificial Intelligence which would require to be closely regulated.

Councillor O'Donnell advised that he had a number of concerns in relation to the strategy, which he had discussed separately with the Director of Education and other officers prior to the meeting, highlighting that there was a need for a clearer rationale within the strategy to explain why this work was being taken forward and the expected impact on pupil and staff outcomes and wellbeing. He added that there should also be clearer information on the provision of digital devices to those experiencing social exclusion.

In response, the Education Senior Manager agreed to submit a follow up report to a future Education Committee meeting specifically seeking to be more explicit in the links between the digital learning and teaching strategy and the wider work of the department. In addition, it was agreed to consider the expected impacts on pupil outcomes through consideration of the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

Mr Morris highlighted the impact of technology on teaching staff, particularly in relation to workload, and how this would be linked with the wider education reform which was ongoing, and it was acknowledged that this was an area which would require further work in due course when the outcome of education reforms was known.

The Director of Education confirmed that continuous improvement was always a part of the Education Department's approach but he accepted that more work required to be done to highlight how this strategy would impact on both pupil and teacher outcomes and wellbeing. He advised that this could be achieved through regular Standards and Quality reports; regular inspections; and internal reviews, amongst other things. However, he advised that he would be reluctant to directly link the use of technology with attainment targets. He added that the presentations provided today illustrated some of the ways in which the gender gap for learning was being targeted within schools.

In response to a question from Councillor Anderson on the connectivity infrastructure within educational establishments, the Director of Education advised that he worked closely with colleagues in Business Operations and Partnerships in this regard and that this type of issue was reviewed regularly through reports submitted to Cabinet and Council as part of the transformation programme.

The committee agreed to:-

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- (a) note the evaluation undertaken on the department's previous digital learning and teaching strategy;
- (b) approve the new draft digital learning and teaching strategy for 2024-27; and
- (c) request the Director of Education to report to the Education Committee on the impact of its implementation, including in relation to the links between the digital learning and teaching strategy and the wider work of the department; and to consider the expected impacts on pupil outcomes through consideration of the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs); and
- (d) otherwise, note the report, presentations and associated comments.

PERFORMANCE 2022-2023 – PRESENTATION

663. Councillor Anderson invited the Head of Education Services (Performance and Quality Improvement) to give a presentation on the performance of East Renfrewshire Schools in the broad general education and senior phase. It was reported that the information presented would include information from primary establishments, junior phase secondary data, as well as senior phase data relating to SQA awards.

She reported that there had been improvements in reading, writing, talking & listening, and mathematics attainment throughout the years of the Broad General Education when compared to 2021-22. 91% of Primary 1, 4 and 7 pupils were achieving expected levels or better for reading, 90% for writing, 94% in talking and listening, and 91% in maths. It was highlighted that there had been a 2% increase for all pupils in reading achievement with children resident in SIMD 1 and 2 areas remaining the same as last year. She highlighted that there was a need to focus efforts on helping those most in need to ensure that the equity gap could be bridged. However, SIMD 1 and 2 children achieving the expected level in numeracy had increased by 1% since 2021-22, which was the same increase as the overall figure. It was reported that the gender gap had decreased for both literacy and numeracy since 2021-22. Figures for pupils in S3 in relation to reading, writing, and talking & listening, showed that numbers had remained static or had improved in relation to overall figures and for those within SIMD 1 and 2, and the gender gap had also reduced. However, it was highlighted that the overall numeracy figure had reduced by 2%.

Thereafter, further detail was provided on improvements in the senior phase. Focussing on the S4 cohort, she reported that around 7% of the cohort were registered for free school meals; 23% identified as an ethnic minority; and the number of young people living in quintile 1 had slightly reduced when compared to last year's S4 cohort. Information was provided on the number of pupils in S4 who sat National 5 exams, and the pass rates awarded. Overall, the authority's pass rate had improved with Williamwood, Woodfarm and St. Luke's High Schools recording increases. It was further reported that, when comparing awards of 5 or more at SQA level 5 or better, all schools in East Renfrewshire had outperformed their virtual comparator, and this was also the case for awards of 5 or more at SQA level 6 or better for S5 pupils. In relation to pupils in S6 achieving 1 or more awards at SQA level 7, the virtual comparator was outperformed for most schools. Information was also provided on the quality of awards achieved showing that, not only had the number of S4 pupils achieving 8 or more Nat 5 awards increased to 59.5%, but the number of pupils achieving 8 or more A awards had also increased to 28%. She added that pupils were being well supported at both home and school to achieve these increases.

Further information was provided on the use of Insight tariff points which could assist with identifying gaps between different groups of pupils. Insight point information was provided by SIMD for the most deprived 30%, middle 40% and least deprived 30% of pupils, which showed that, although the figures had dipped slightly for pupils from the most deprived areas when compared to the years when pupils did not sit a formal exam, the figures had in fact increased for all groups when compared to those achieved prior to the pandemic in 2019. These figures had led to a national debate on the best way to measure attainment in the senior phase and the data provided would be used to inform future consultations in that regard.

Leaver attainment information across literacy and numeracy was provided for the last 5 years showing that literacy and numeracy at levels 4, 5 and 6 had generally stayed the same or had slightly increased. In terms of leaver destinations, figures showed that the percentage of leavers in a positive destination had increased for all leavers, but particularly for those leavers in quintile 1 which had increased by 6% since 2018.

Improvement case studies were provided, including in relation to a project on Improving Literacy through Reading Recovery. Two principal teachers of literacy had been appointed to lead reading recovery in the authority and to support staff in all schools to target pupils, usually in Primary 2, who required additional support in this area. 61 pupils across 8 schools had worked with the reading recovery teachers and all pupils involved had improved their reading skills.

Thereafter, an improvement case study was provided for Woodfarm High School. At Woodfarm High School universal support was provided for all senior phase pupils and included shared ethos of ambition for all; whole school assessment calendar to balance workload for pupils throughout the year; access to study skills sessions; supported study and Easter school; use of industry partners and alumni where possible; and relentless level of effort from all stakeholders. Targeted support was also provided through a new mentoring programme for S4, S5, and S6 pupils; narrowing the gap through robust interventions for key equity groups; creative and bespoke curriculum for pupils where appropriate; provision of free stationery and study materials to remove barriers; individualised target setting and personalised study timetables where appropriate; and family learning programme for parents and carers.

Ms Graham welcomed the information provided, adding that the impact of lockdown should not be underestimated for the current S4 and S5 pupils in relation to their skills development and socialisation and the impact on their mental health. She added that it was a great tribute to the young people, teachers and families that they had achieved as much as they had considering what they had gone through in the past few years.

Thereafter, a number of members thanked the Head of Education Services (Performance and Quality Improvement) for a very informative presentation and requested that any future presentation on this subject be provided to members in advance of the meeting, if possible, to allow additional preparations to be made. Having heard Councillor Pragnell welcome the additional data on attendance which was due to be provided in February 2024, Councillor O'Donnell sought additional information in relation to the gender gap in general; attainment gaps in primary schools which remained stubborn; and the possibility of increasing targets in some areas as they had already been achieved this year. In response, the Head of Education Services (Performance and Quality Improvement) advised that individual schools were supported to look at different ways to address imbalances, including in relating to gender gaps, and this work would continue on that basis as each school had different needs. She advised that literacy and numeracy support in the primary sector had been included as part of the Strategic Equity Plan report considered at the last Education Committee meeting. This plan included 3 workstreams, which would be submitted to the Education Committee separately in due course to allow each area to be considered in more detail. In relation to achievement

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targets, she advised that the targets had been shared with schools and wouldn't necessarily be amended at this stage. However, she added that, where schools had already achieved their targets, they could push beyond the targets which had been set as there was no upper limit.

Having heard Members commend the work of pupils, teachers and staff in producing such excellent results, the committee noted the presentation and associated comments.

CHAIR