Thematic Inspection of Empowerment for Parent and Pupil Participation

June 2019

Contents

Foreword

Improving the education and life chances of our children and young people is the defining mission of our Scottish education system. Our shared ambition is to close the unacceptable gap in attainment between our least and most disadvantaged children and to raise attainment for all. We are clear that our vision of excellence and equity cannot be achieved by one part of the system alone: all partners must work together in a collegiate and collaborative way, keeping the interests of children and young people front and centre.

Together we can achieve change quicker and better than working alone. That has been a key theme of the Joint Agreement and between stakeholders who form the Joint Agreement Steering Group.

Part of Education Scotland's role has been to carry out three national thematic inspections to gather evidence on aspects of school empowerment. The third of these: Empowerment for Pupil and Parent Participation took place either side of the spring break in 2019 and this report draws together the findings from that inspection.

I am encouraged that HM Inspectors have identified a number of key strengths and examples of strong practice existing in Scottish education. We know there remains more to be done as schools are empowered to work collaboratively with children, young people and families to meet the needs of their learning community.

I would urge local authorities, schools and communities to embrace the opportunity to make local decisions that will help them meet the needs of children and young people in their communities. Central to local decision-making is meaningful engagement and co-construction with parents and pupils not only when planning and developing policies, guidance and improvements but also when evaluating the impact on outcomes for learners and the work of the school.

This evidence, along with that from the previous two thematic inspections, highlights the progress that is being made towards an empowered education system. I trust that Scotland's learners, educators, parents and partners will benefit from the findings of this third national thematic inspection on empowerment and take account of its recommendations as they take forward their work.

Gayle Gorman

HM Chief Inspector of Education

Introduction

The [Education Reform – Joint Agreement](#) published in June 2018 sets out the collective agreement by a commissioning group including the Scottish Government, COSLA, SOLACE, ADES and Education Scotland:

> .   'Improving the education life chances of our children and young people is the defining mission of our Scottish education system. Our shared ambition is to close the unacceptable gap in attainment between our least and most disadvantaged children and to raise attainment for all. We are clear that our vision of excellence and equity cannot be achieved by one part of the system alone; all partners must work together in a collegiate and collaborative way, keeping the interests of children and young people front and centre. Empowered, responsible and collaborative schools are an important part of our shared vision for Scottish education.'

The Joint Agreement sets out agreed principles, enablers and measures that will support and encourage the empowerment of schools in Scotland. These include the commitment that Education Scotland would carry out three inspections in the 2018-19 academic year looking at the following themes: Readiness for Empowerment; Curriculum Leadership; and Parent and Pupil Participation.

This report provides the findings related to the third and final of these thematic inspections on Parent and Pupil Participation.
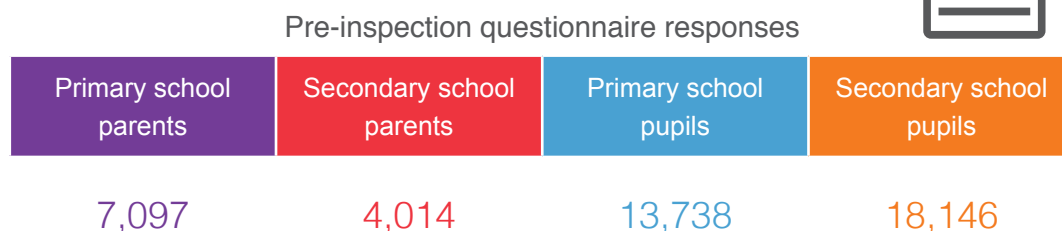
Scope of the Empowerment for Parent and Pupil Participation thematic inspection

Over the period March to May 2019, Education Scotland visited 45 schools from the primary, secondary and special sectors across 32 local authorities. During their visits, HM Inspectors discussed how schools are engaging parents, children and young people in the life and work of the school. They engaged with various groups, including children and young people, parents[1], staff and partners, visited classrooms and looked at a sample of relevant documentation.

1 Throughout this report, the term 'parents' should be taken to include foster carers, residential care staff and carers who are relatives or friends.

We have also drawn on relevant information taken from the pre-inspection questionnaire data from the 2018-2019 academic year. The results are based on the sample of schools inspected between August 2018 and March 2019 and the questions that stakeholders chose to answer. Therefore, the results are not a nationally representative sample. Where terms of quantity are used, these are based on the proportion of respondents who 'strongly agreed' and 'agreed' with the statement.

The pre-inspection questionnaire statements are based on the following number of responses.

Pre-inspection questionnaire responses

Primary school parents	Secondary school parents	Primary school pupils	Secondary school pupils
7,097	4,014	13,738	18,146

Evidence was gathered for each of the following areas:

1. Parental and community engagement: How well do schools engage parents and the community in the life of the school and their child's learning to improve outcomes for children and young people?

2. Pupil participation: How well do schools ensure that the views of children and young people are heard, respected and taken seriously, as is central to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child?

Schools visited were asked to complete a self-evaluation of their empowerment for parent and pupil participation and to provide evidence against the two categories above. This was used as a starting point for gathering evidence for the thematic inspection.

Education Scotland's findings are summarised in the remainder of this report under the headings above. In each section, and overarching narrative key messages, information on evidence from the thematic inspection visits together with views from participants and illustrations of practice are provided.

Participants

- Parents
- Pupils
- Staff
- Partners

326
377
757
526

Thematic inspection findings

1. How well do schools engage parents and the community in the life of the school and their child's learning to improve outcomes for children and young people?
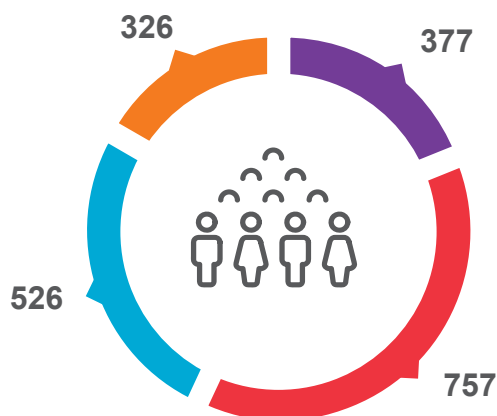
Key messages

- Overall, there are high levels of trust and positive relationships between schools, parents and partners.

- Schools actively seek the views of parents, particularly when reviewing their vision, values and aims and consulting on the school improvement priorities.

- Schools are not yet consistently making the most of the collective capacity and willingness of parents and the community to improve outcomes for children and young people. Further work is needed to illustrate to parents how their views influence and lead to school improvement.

- Schools are using a range of methods to communicate with parents and increase parental involvement in their child's learning.

- Schools work effectively with their Parent Council. Parents of children attending primary schools value how the Parent Council keeps them informed more so than those of pupils attending secondary schools.

- While engaging parents and partners in the curriculum rationale is increasing, there is more to be done to ensure parents and partners have a more significant role in developing and evaluating the curriculum.

- There are examples of parents being involved in decision-making around how funding is spent. Recently, Pupil Equity Funding has been a significant driver in this regard. Further work is needed to increase parental involvement in decisions relating to funding and recruitment.

Engaging parents and the wider community in school policy and improvement

Overall, there is a high level of trust between parents and schools. Almost all headteachers consult with parents on the school's vision, values and aims. Most schools are now actively developing these in partnership with stakeholders rather than simply asking for comments and feedback. A few have identified a need to refresh their vision, values and aims to ensure that they are relevant to their community and shared by all.

'We don't need to encourage or push the school to improve they are always looking for ways of doing things better, they push us to strive for more.' (parent)

'I have found out far more about the workings of the school by attending Parent Council meetings.' (parent)

'There is trust in the people who run the school and we don't want to make the decisions. We want the staff to get on with working with the children.' (parent)

In the strongest examples, schools are co-constructing their vision, values and aims and involving all parents, staff, children and partners. These approaches are helping to ensure that the vision, values and aims are truly shared and understood by all stakeholders.

Headteachers use a variety of ways to engage parents in the development of school improvement planning including surveys, focus groups, open afternoons and parent evenings. Schools are increasingly using technology to engage with a wider group of parents including online surveys, apps and social media. As a result, almost all schools are consulting with parents and the school community to inform improvement priorities. However, there are still instances whereby engagement around school improvement planning is limited to working with the Parent Council.

A majority of schools consult with parents on the updating of school policies in, for example, homework and home learning, school uniform, and promoting positive relationships. Some schools find it challenging to engage a wider group of parents in school improvement. This is more evident in the secondary sector.

Schools need to continue to develop their understanding of the barriers some parents face in getting involved in the life and work of the school. This includes working with partners and developing the skills of staff to consider and help overcome any barriers.

In most schools there is considerable scope for working with parents to help them understand how their views and feedback can influence and contribute to school improvement.

Most schools have an effective and confident Parent Council who undertake work to support schools. Activities include involvement in school improvement planning, communicating with the wider parent body and providing senior school leaders with a parental perspective on aspects of their work. Schools are clearly working towards empowering parents directly and through their work with the Parent Council. Schools now need to develop and create a culture of collaboration based firmly on the principle of co-production.

- A majority of primary school parents agreed that the school takes their views into account when making changes.

- Less than half of secondary school parents agreed that the school takes their views into account when making changes.

- Most primary school parents agreed that they are kept informed about the work of the Parent Council and/or parent association.

- A majority of secondary school parents agreed that they are kept informed about the work of the Parent Council and/or parent association.

Summary of relevant survey data from pre-inspection questionnaires.

Actively engaging parents in recruitment of staff

'There was engagement with parents and pupils throughout the recent headteacher recruitment process. The education authority was genuinely interested in our views.' (parent)

While all schools involve the Parent Council in the recruitment of headteachers and other senior staff, only a few are beginning to involve parents in the recruitment and selection of other staff including middle leaders, class teachers and family link workers. In a few schools where staff recruitment is a particular challenge, parents have been proactive at supporting the school to advertise posts using social media. Parents appreciate the training that local authorities provide on the recruitment processes and welcome the opportunity to be involved in recruitment.

Involving parents in decisions about how funding is spent

Overall, parents are not yet sufficiently involved in making decisions around how Pupil Equity Funding will be used to benefit children and young people. While the majority of schools share some information about school budgets with their Parent Council or other parental partnership groups, only a few schools currently involve parents in decision-making around how funding is spent. Schools recognise this is an area for improvement and some have plans in place to develop this further. The introduction of Pupil Equity Funding has been a strong driver for engaging parents in decision-making processes relating to funding.

Engaging parents and partners in developing and evaluating the school curriculum

'The curriculum is child-led but parents are also consulted.' (parent)

As already highlighted in our Thematic Inspection of Empowerment for Curriculum Leadership, headteachers do not yet collaborate with parents sufficiently in discussion about curriculum design or evaluating the impact of curriculum change. This point is emphasised further through our engagement with parents as part of this thematic inspection. Less than half of schools visited engage parents in developing the curriculum and only a few involve them in any evaluation of the curriculum. Parents who have been involved in evaluating the curriculum feel they have deepened their understanding of experiences, opportunities and skills being delivered in schools and how this will support their child's learning.

Supporting parents to actively and meaningfully participate in their children's learning and the life of the school

'The new school app is a big improvement to communication with parents. It is accessible to all and you can find all the information you need in one place.' (parent)

Overall, communication and the engagement of parents in their children's learning is improving. Almost all schools use an increasing variety of methods to communicate with parents and are now making more effective use of digital technology. Communication channels include newsletters, notice boards, websites, text messages, emails, social media, local radio and mobile apps. However, there is a need to improve the quality and consistency of the information given to parents about their child's progress.

'There are lots of opportunities to get involved in the school and find out about learning.' (parent)

A few schools are carefully considering how they communicate with parents, particularly those who face barriers. Some are already planning to improve communication and have identified scope to increase their use of digital technology as one way of involving parents more in the life and work of the school. Parents highlighted consistency of how different staff use social media to communicate and having a school website with current and more relevant information as key mechanisms for communication.

'I learnt things at Family Time that I didn't know the children were doing in class. I can do these activities now with my child at home.' (parent)

'The quality of the conversation at parents' night. You feel that your child is well known and that the teacher has a deep insight in to their strengths and next steps in learning.' (parent)

Schools are developing new and creative ways to engage parents in their children's learning. Particularly across primary schools, parents are happy and positive about schools' approaches to engaging them in their child's learning. They feel there is a genuine open-door policy.

Some are moving away from offering only parents' evenings and introducing a calendar of different opportunities designed to increase participation in their child's learning. Examples include shared starts, learning visits and family open days, masterclasses and curriculum workshops, family learning programmes, learning logs, class blogs and shared online classrooms.

A number of schools are making use of Pupil Equity Funding to increase opportunities for parents to actively and meaningfully participate in their child's learning through, for example, providing family learning opportunities. Increasingly, schools are using digital technology to engage parents more actively with their child's learning. As well as online classrooms, some schools are now using homework apps and reporting 'live' about young people's progress. Parents appreciate this approach and the direct line of communication with class teachers. Staff also provide and signpost parents to resources that they can use to support their children's learning.

- Most primary school parents agreed that they receive helpful, regular feedback about how their child is learning and developing.

- A majority of secondary school parents agreed that they receive helpful, regular feedback about how their child is learning and developing.

Summary of relevant survey data from pre-inspection questionnaires.

Illustrations of practice related to parent and partner participation

A primary school in partnership with a college provides opportunities for parents to participate in the Adult Achievement Awards. As a result, parents are gaining confidence and reconnecting with learning. This is leading to positive outcomes for them and their families and having a positive impact on the life of the school. The school's partnership with the church is also a strong example of working with the community. This is helping to bring about positive change to an area that has suffered from significant job losses and the resulting challenges and difficulties this brings.

The secondary school places a significant emphasis on developing young people's skills through a wide variety of sports. Staff and young people talk very positively about their success in sports and the ways in which sports activities help them to engage more fully in the life of the school. These activities also enhance the school's increasingly positive reputation in the local community. Parents are involved considerably in leading and engaging with the sports teams. They give up much of their time to offer support.

The school's family link worker has been involved in a city-wide parental involvement and engagement group. They have produced a helpful booklet on parental engagement and an improvement plan. Pupil Equity Funding has also funded family stay and play sessions for siblings and the development of a sensory library. The school is very involved in identifying accessible places within the city. They work closely with a Scottish charity to promote a more inclusive society. This is of tremendous support to parents. Parents, staff and children are also fully involved in campaigning for disability access and rights.

A family engagement principal teacher has been appointed through Pupil Equity Funding. They are using their experience in physical education and pupil support to establish close effective partnerships with key agencies including social work and health. The teacher uses these links skilfully and sensitively, at times in very challenging circumstances, to find strategies to support young people directly. When appropriate, they extend that support proactively to parents and families, and sustain their engagement with the school.

Thematic inspection findings

2. How well do schools ensure that the views of children and young people are heard, respected and taken seriously, as is central to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child?

Key messages

- Children and young people are regularly involved in reviewing their school's vision, values and aims. This works best where schools co-produce these with pupils, leading to shared ownership.

- Overall, the voice of children and young people in schools is getting stronger using a wider range of approaches. The focus is beginning to shift from how the school operates to respecting pupils' views on the quality of their learning experience.

- Children and young people are increasingly taking responsibility for their own learning. There is also a broadening range of leadership opportunities outside the classroom and more opportunities for personal achievement.

- There is considerable scope to increase the opportunities for children and young people to lead their own learning. Meaningful personalisation and choice need to be further developed.

- Further work is needed to ensure that children and young people are actively engaged in school improvement, including designing and evaluating the curriculum.

Ensuring that children and young people participate meaningfully in their own learning

Children and young people are increasingly taking responsibility for their own learning in most primary schools and in the majority of secondary schools. Where this works best, children and young people engage in regular learning conversations and benefit from effective feedback. Approaches to self- and peer-assessment are used effectively and children and young people set their own learning goals. This is not yet consistent across schools. In some primary schools, children want to be more actively engaged in setting their own targets and in secondary schools, young people want teachers to be more consistent in giving them feedback about their learning. Further work is required to reduce this variability and ensure that all children and young people have meaningful opportunities to lead their own learning.

'When teachers let you lead your learning it is more fun and you learn more.' (secondary pupil)

In special schools children and young people have lots of opportunities for personalisation, choice and differentiation tailored to their needs, this is not consistent in primary and secondary schools. While there are examples of schools providing appropriate opportunities for personalisation and choice to support progression in children's and young people's learning this too is variable.

Engaging children and young people in decision-making related to the life and work of the school

In the majority of schools, children and young people are involved in the development of the school's vision, values and aims. In the strongest examples, this has led to a deeper understanding of the school's values and these becoming embedded into the school's culture, ethos and practice.

'We need to move beyond pupil councils that only deal with broad issues and help children to talk more about what helps them to learn.' (teacher)

Almost all primary and special schools and most secondary schools have one or more pupil voice groups. There is now a much broader range of approaches beyond the pupil council. These include pupil leadership teams, pupil parliaments and conferences, committee and house structures and ambassadors. Increasingly, schools have a strong focus on children's rights.

Encouragingly, pupil councils and other pupil voice groups are building on focusing on the operational aspects of how their school is run to becoming more involved in sharing their views on their learning experience, school improvement planning and helping to review school policies.

'If we are to take on more responsibility, we want to see the impact it is having on school improvement.' (secondary pupil)

There are a few strong examples, particularly in secondary schools, of engaging children and young people in developing and evaluating the curriculum. However, overall this is a key aspect for further development.

Schools now need to continue to better support and encourage children and young people to have a stronger voice in school improvement and decision-making.

- Most primary school pupils agreed that staff help them to understand how they are progressing in their school work.

- Most secondary school pupils agreed that staff help them to understand how they are progressing in their school work all of the time or some of the time.

- Most primary school pupils felt that their teachers ask them about what things they want to learn in school all of the time or some of the time.

- A majority of secondary school pupils said that they are given the opportunity to influence what and how they learn all of the time or some of the time.

Summary of relevant survey data from pre-inspection questionnaires.

Engaging children and young people in a range of opportunities for personal achievement and in the wider community

Almost all schools offer an increasing range of opportunities for children and young people to develop their leadership skills in roles such as house captains, buddies, ambassadors, sports leaders, mentors and event organisers. Most engage children and young people in the wider community through a range of planned activities and experiences. Schools should continue to enhance their links with the local community to provide more opportunities for children and young people to develop as active citizens.

- A majority of primary school pupils agreed that their school takes their views into account.

- A majority of secondary school pupils agreed that their school takes their views into account.

Summary of relevant survey data from pre-inspection questionnaires.

Illustrations of practice related to pupil participation

A pupil-led Equality Forum is raising awareness of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) and other equality, inclusion and diversity issues with young people. Young people drive its work on rights with passion, creativity and pride in promoting a culture of respect for difference, reflecting one of the school's key values. Young people are proud of the impact of their participation and feel genuinely empowered. Significantly, the group has played an important role in equalities decision-making and policy-making in the school, including a Coming Out Guide and a Trans Inclusion policy. As a result of the group's influence, the school has changed its S6 arrangements to create gender neutral leadership roles.

For many years, all children across the school have been involved in groups and committees, such as the pupil council, an Eco group, and a fundraising group. This has grown as a result of the school's understanding of citizenship, and all children's right to be heard. More recently, senior leaders and staff have developed this further, ensuring that all of the pupil voice committees are closely linked to raising attainment, and closing the poverty-related attainment gap. The pupil committees now comprise literacy, numeracy, science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and religious and moral education. There is also a pupil council focused on improving learning and teaching. Through these committees, that meet every week as part of planned learning and teaching, all children at all stages are fully involved in developing the curriculum, evaluating and creating resources and helping their school to improve.

Children's individualised project-based work, building on a long-standing cluster transition approach, is a strength of the school. All children from P2 to P7 engage in their learning in depth by working on individual projects, on different themes, throughout the year. This approach is very popular with children and parents. Children's independence as curious and inquisitive learners is a strong feature of practice. Their confidence is enhanced through opportunities to share their projects with parents and families at open days.

The partnership working with the wider community permeates the work of the school. This is supporting children to be active members of their local community. As they learn, children are supported to make meaningful links with their life outside of school. The curriculum is relevant and reflects the unique context of the school and its community.

Partnership working with local community groups actively engages all children across the school and there is evidence of a coherent whole school approach to learning for sustainability. For example, an intergenerational project plays a significant role in the life of the local community. Community members and children value highly the learning and enjoyment gained from this work. Children's views shape the activities and direction of the project with senior citizens of the local area. Also, the school's highly effective partnership with a local community development organisation involves all children in sustainable food production and takes forward key aspects of the health and wellbeing curriculum. The work has developed children's leadership and transferable skills for life, learning and work. Both projects are jointly planned and evaluated between the school and the organisations and they continue to sustain and improve their partnerships.

Empowerment for parent and pupil participation overall findings

The thematic inspection [Readiness for Empowerment](#) identified six dimensions of empowerment which are important levers for change. The inspection report highlighted that the dimensions can apply at all different levels of the education system to ensure that decisions about children's and young people's learning and school life are taken within schools, supported by parents and the local community.

The following dimensions of empowerment are emerging as features of practice within and across Scottish schools related to parent and pupil participation.

Autonomy: Parents and pupils being actively involved in the life of their school in a variety of different roles. Critically, they have a key role in identifying improvement priorities for their own school to ensure that learners' needs are met in ways that are most appropriate for the school's particular context.

Professional learning: Professional learning ensures that school staff understand the barriers some parents face to getting involved in their child's learning and the life of their school. They have the skills needed to meet the range of parents' and families' needs.

Participation and engagement: Parents and pupils have appropriate opportunities to participate meaningfully in the life of the school. They are confident that their voices are listened to and taken into account and have a sense of shared ownership in relation to school improvement planning.

Collaboration: There is authentic co-production of school policy and improvement with the involvement of parents and pupils in evidence-based decision-making about the life and work of the school.

Resources: Parents and pupils have sufficient opportunities to be involved in the recruitment of staff and in decisions about how funding is spent, where appropriate.

Impact: Parents and pupils participate fully in evaluating the impact of school improvement priorities, including designing and evaluating the local curriculum.

These dimensions of empowerment are important levers for change. They can help to ensure that parents, pupils and the local community are fully involved in important decisions about children's and young people's learning and school life.

Key strengths

- Positive relationships and high levels of trust between schools, parents and partners.

- Increasing range of methods used by schools to improve parental engagement in children's and young people's learning.

- Involvement of pupils and parents in creating and reviewing school vision, values and aims relevant to the context of the school within its community.

- Positive steps to support children and young people to develop their leadership skills through a broader range of approaches, including opportunities to share views on improvement priorities.

- Commitment of Parent Councils and other parent groups to support and be actively involved in school improvement.

- Partnership working to improve learning experiences and support a range of opportunities for children and young people to develop their leadership skills.

Aspects for improvement

- Build on current approaches and further develop ways for pupils and parents to participate meaningfully in the life and work of the school.

- Continue to increase children's and young people's opportunities to lead their own learning and contribute to school improvement.

- Involve pupils, parents and partners more in curriculum design and evaluating the impact of curriculum change.

- Strengthen further the involvement of parents in their child's learning.

- Improve the contribution of parents in decision-making around staffing and how funding is spent to bring about improvement.

Recommendations

- Actively promote parental and pupil engagement and involvement in decision-making to ensure learners' needs are met in ways most appropriate to the school's context.

- Develop meaningful co-production of local school policy and improvement ensuring that parents, learners and partners are more actively engaged in evaluating improvement.

- Engage staff and school communities further in discussions about what authentic parent and pupil participation means within their local context.

- Ensure staff are supported to develop their skills to overcome any barriers to parental and pupil participation.

Appendix 1: Schools visited

School	Local authority
Bridge Of Don Academy	Aberdeen City Council
Hazlehead Primary School	Aberdeen City Council
Marykirk School	Aberdeenshire Council
Arbroath High School	Angus Council
Port Charlotte Primary School	Argyll and Bute Council
Alloa Academy	Clackmannanshire Council
Sgoil Lionacleit	Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles Council)
Shawbost School	Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles Council)
Douglas Ewart High School	Dumfries and Galloway Council
Braeview Academy	Dundee City Council
Stewarton Academy	East Ayrshire Council
Bishopbriggs Academy	East Dunbartonshire Council
Milngavie Primary School	East Dunbartonshire Council
Musselburgh Grammar School	East Lothian Council
Busby Primary School	East Renfrewshire Council
Laurieston Primary School	Falkirk Council
St Mungo's RC High School	Falkirk Council
Aberhill Primary School	Fife Council
John Fergus School	Fife Council
Kelbourne Park Primary School	Glasgow City Council
Govan High School	Glasgow City Council
St Teresa's Primary School	Glasgow City Council
Notre Dame High School	Inverclyde Council
Cornbank Primary School	Midlothian Council
Dalkeith High School	Midlothian Council
Botriphnie Primary School	Moray Council
Ardrossan Academy	North Ayrshire Council
Lamlash Primary School	North Ayrshire Council
Glencryan School	North Lanarkshire Council
St Aidan's Primary School	North Lanarkshire Council
Shapinsay Community School	Orkney Islands Council
Viewlands Primary School	Perth and Kinross Council
Wallace Primary School	Renfrewshire Council
Selkirk High School	Scottish Borders Council
Anderson High School	Shetland Islands Council
Dailly Primary School	South Ayrshire Council
Marr College	South Ayrshire Council
West Mains School	South Lanarkshire Council
Balfron High School	Stirling Council
Kincardine-in-Menteith Primary School	Stirling Council
Oaklands School	The City of Edinburgh Council
St Mary's RC Primary School (Edinburgh)	The City of Edinburgh Council
Nairn Academy	The Highland Council
Our Lady and St Patrick's High School	West Dunbartonshire Council
Meldrum Primary School	West Lothian Council

Appendix 2: Explanation of terms of quantity

The following standard Education Scotland terms of quantity are used in this report:

All 100%	**Almost all** 91%-99%	**Most** 75%-90%
Majority 50%-74%	**Minority/less than half** 15%-49%	**A few** < 15%

Other quantitative terms used in this report are to be understood as in common English usage.