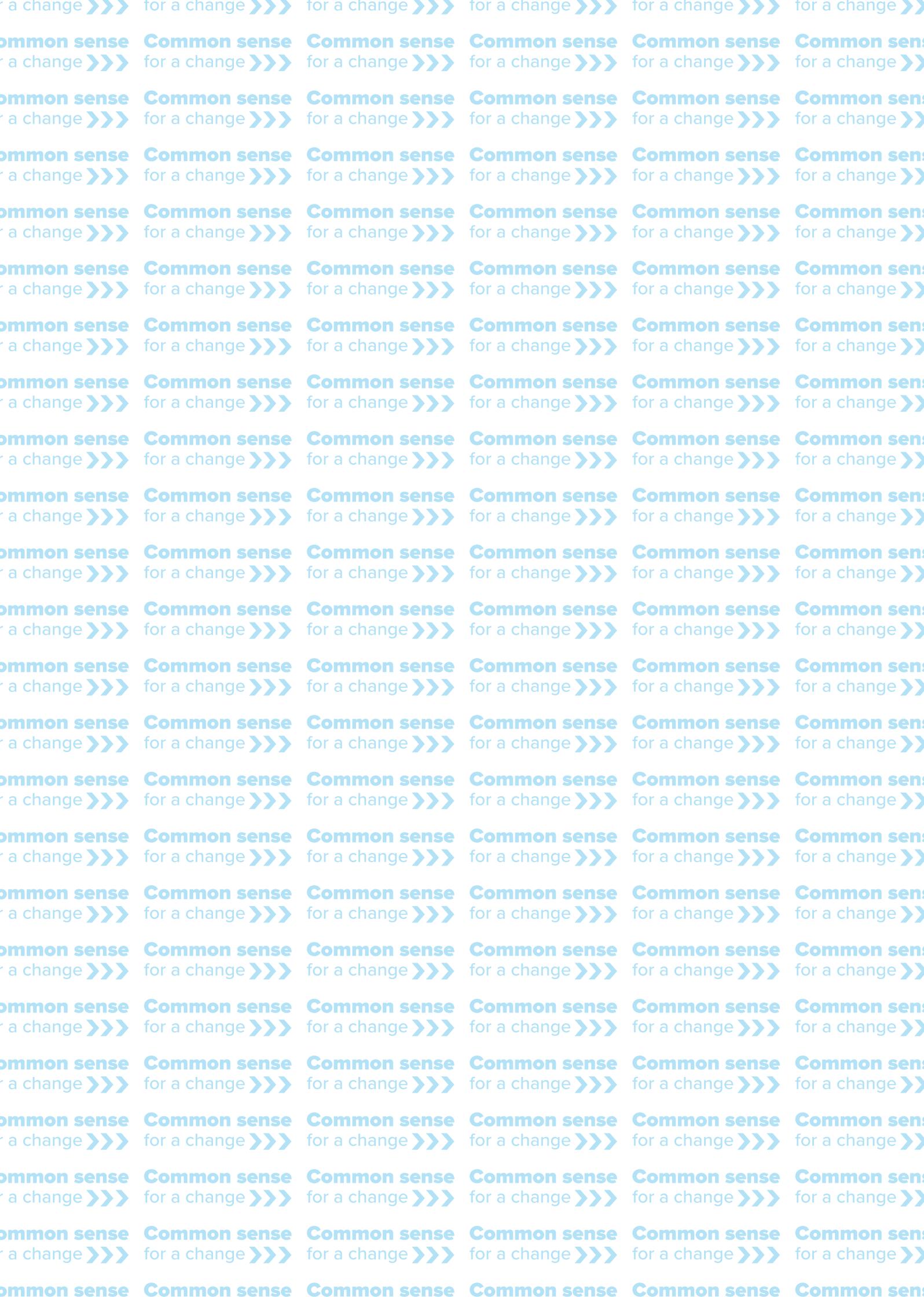


A COMMON SENSE PLAN

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# Improving our schools

Scottish Conservative & Unionist Party  
February 2026





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# Introduction

Scotland has long prided itself on a tradition of educational excellence, but recent years have seen growing concerns about declining standards across our schools. International benchmarks such as the PISA rankings have revealed a persistent drop in literacy and numeracy performance, signalling systemic issues that go beyond temporary setbacks.

Budgetary decisions and frequent policy changes have further strained resources, while mental health challenges among students and staff have added another layer of difficulty. Together, these factors paint a picture of an education system that is in urgent need of reform.

In 2015, Nicola Sturgeon asked the Scottish public to judge her based on her record on education, but it is clear that the SNP have let down a generation of Scottish pupils and teachers.<sup>i</sup> In fact, the SNP's record on education is one of declining standards, mounting school violence, and an unacceptably wide attainment gap between pupils from the most deprived and least deprived backgrounds. The most recent Scottish Household survey has shown that dissatisfaction with schools in Scotland is at its highest ever level, a damning indictment of the SNP's management.<sup>ii</sup>

Scotland's hardworking teachers have a formative influence over our young people, but thanks to the SNP, our teachers spend more time doing paperwork and acting as unofficial social workers, rather than doing what they are best at – providing our pupils

with a comprehensive education. In 2021, the SNP promised to cut class contact time by 90 minutes a week to give teachers more time for activities such as lesson preparation and marking.<sup>iii</sup> This was another broken SNP promise, and almost five years on teachers are under unprecedented pressure, suffering from snowballing demands, ever increasing workloads and, in many cases, burnout.

Central to the problems within Scotland's education system is the need to raise standards and bring knowledge back into the curriculum. In the 2022 PISA assessment, Scotland's literacy and numeracy scores sank, with maths falling below the OECD average.<sup>iv</sup> At the heart of the problem lies the so-called *Curriculum for Excellence*, criticised for its complexity and lack of clarity, which has left teachers and pupils struggling to focus on core knowledge.<sup>v</sup> Compounding this are teacher shortages, the widening attainment gap between pupils from different backgrounds and a worrying rise in classroom behaviour problems that disrupts learning.

We need to restore common sense to Scottish education. It is only right that pupils are given the essential skills that they need to thrive in life, that teachers can teach in safe environments that are free from disruptive pupils, and that we raise standards in our schools to foster ambition in future generations. This paper outlines our plans to restore standards, bring back knowledge to the curriculum, and provide pupils with the common sense and aspiration to succeed in life.

# Our plan to raise schools standards

01

## RAISING STANDARDS IN SCOTTISH SCHOOLS

**Return to knowledge-based learning in Scottish schools with a new Curriculum for Aspiration, focused on the acquisition of knowledge.**

**Increase literacy levels, by mandating the use of synthetic phonics at primary school level to improve children's reading skills.**

**Introduce literacy and numeracy check-ins for students in Primary 1, Primary 4, and Secondary 1, which would check each pupil's progress on achieving certain levels of literacy and numeracy, including their reading age and other key skills, to ensure that no pupil leaves school without being able to read or do basic maths.**

**Abolish Education Scotland, to prevent the issuing of vague guidance and free up resources that would be better deployed raising school standards.** The budget for this quango would be reallocated to deliver improved learning outcomes for pupils.

## BACKING TEACHERS AND RESTORING DISCIPLINE

02

**Provide teachers with greater freedom to teach, by cutting red tape in schools to reduce the amount of paperwork teachers must do.** This will provide teachers with greater freedom to educate and ensure that their valuable time is not wasted by bureaucracy. We would also explore reducing contact hours for teachers from 22.5 hours to 20 hours a week and making greater use of digital technology to reduce admin and allow more focus to be given to lesson preparation and marking.

**Restore discipline to schools, by giving headteachers the explicit authority to exclude pupils as a disciplinary measure, to support safe, orderly and effective learning environments.** This would replace the current system in which this power is held by local authorities.

**Support a national ban on mobile phones in schools, by introducing a Schools (Phone Ban) Bill that would ban mobile phones in schools and ensure that pupils are not distracted from their learning.**

03

## EMPOWERING HEADTEACHERS AND REFORMING SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

**Empower headteachers, by transferring powers from local authorities to give headteachers greater oversight of school budgets, along with the hiring and firing of staff within their schools.**

**Give schools the ability to opt out of local authority control with their agreement, and become grant-aided schools, like Jordanhill School in Glasgow.** These schools would be directly funded by the Scottish Government, rather than local authorities and would have greater freedoms on how they teach the curriculum, set the structure of their school days and give parents more say over the overall learning direction of the school.

**Support rural schools, by exploring options to allow for sustainable rural education and support for communities in rural areas to be empowered to ensure that rural schools can remain open if they are under threat of closure.**

04

## SUPPORTING PUPILS AND PARENTS

**Give all school children access to residential outdoor education, ensuring that pupils can benefit from Liz Smith MSP's Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill and experience at least four nights and five days of residential outdoor education during their school career.**

**Undertake a national review of the mainstreaming of Additional Support Needs pupils within schools, to assess whether this is the best approach for ASN pupils and to ensure that their learning needs are met.**

**Create new partnerships between schools and colleges to allow pupils who are disengaged from school to go to college or start an apprenticeship aged 14 or 15.** This would ensure that pupils who do not perform best in traditional educational pathways can either go on to an apprenticeship or college.

**Reverse the SNP's introduction of business rates and Labour's VAT on independent schools, so that parents are not punished for sending their children to an independent school and to reduce pressure on state schools.**

**Support parents and carers, by issuing fresh guidance that encourages local authorities to provide Triple P programmes for parents and carers, and work with the schools to ensure that the effects of positive parenting are carried through into the classroom.**



# Returning knowledge to the curriculum

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**Scotland's education system was once renowned for the emphasis that it placed on knowledge and on giving every pupil the best start in life.**

Scotland's score in the 2022 PISA assessment for reading was 493, down from 504 in 2018 and 526 in 2000 when the PISA study started. For maths, Scotland's score in 2022 was 471, which is just below the OECD average of 472 points. This decline has become so marked that Scotland now lags behind Latvia for science, behind Estonia in reading, and Lithuania in maths.<sup>vi</sup> Furthermore, more than one in four Scottish primary school pupils are still not achieving the literacy levels expected of them.<sup>vii</sup>

The SNP Government claimed that their PISA scores proved that Scotland had “maintained its international standing”. This is nothing but another endorsement of the uniform mediocrity that the SNP has allowed in our schools. The SNP Government's own press release on the PISA scores said that Scotland was ‘above’ or ‘similar’ to the OECD average on reading, maths, and science, but this is not acceptable.<sup>viii</sup>

This is most evident when we look at literacy and numeracy. Only 75% of P7 pupils heading into high school are achieving the expected level of literacy, just 77% in writing and 79% in numeracy<sup>ix</sup>. Furthermore, the gap between the poorest and most affluent schools stands at 18.9 points in literacy and 17.1 points in numeracy<sup>x</sup>. This pattern is more concerning when it comes to secondary education. It was reported in 2024 that approximately 30% of secondary students

are behind in their reading, with some as far as eight years behind<sup>xi</sup>. Worse still, almost one fifth of school leavers do not have a National 5 in literacy.<sup>xii</sup>

To improve literacy rates, **we need to address how reading and writing are taught at primary school level.** Many Scottish schools continue to use a mix of phonics and ‘cueing’ approaches. This is when children are encouraged to guess words using pictures or context clues, unlike systematic synthetic phonics which teaches children to decode letters and sounds to form words. The SNP Government say that it is up to schools to determine the approach they take on teaching reading and insist that their approach has resulted in literacy levels being at a “record high”.<sup>xiii</sup>

This claim, however, does not reflect the experience of pupils. That is why the Scottish Conservatives would **make phonics the central method for teaching reading in Scotland.** Evidence shows phonics deliver better outcomes than cueing, with evidence from England demonstrating the effectiveness of this approach. Since the introduction of the phonics screening check in England under the last UK Conservative Government, reading levels have steadily risen to near the top of international rankings. In the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), England's reading came fourth with an average score of 558.<sup>xiv</sup> At present, councils in Scotland adopt inconsistent methods, leaving children with unequal opportunities. A clear national policy on phonics would raise standards and guarantee



that every child benefits from the same proven approach. We would therefore mandate the introduction of a phonics screening check for Scotland.

**We would do this via the introduction of literacy check-ins for pupils in Primary 1, Primary 4, and Secondary 1.** Such an assessment would provide a clearer picture of each child's abilities, including their reading age and other key skills. This would ensure that early interventions are targeted where they are most needed. Similarly, we would introduce numeracy check-ins at the same stages, where pupils are tested on their times tables and other basic maths skills that we should expect all children to be able to do.

Putting knowledge at the heart of Scottish education also means tackling head-on the existing problems with the *Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)*. Since its implementation in 2010-11, CfE has been criticised for its lack of clarity and a skills-focused approach that critics argue comes at the expense of knowledge. Furthermore, CfE has faced pronounced implementation challenges, such as reduced subject choice, teacher stress, and inconsistencies across school and local authority areas.<sup>xv</sup> More emphasis has been placed on skills and students' well-being, rather than the systematic acquisition of knowledge.

The existing problems with CfE stem from ambiguities over its 'Four Capabilities', which state that students should become 'successful learners', 'confident individuals', 'responsible citizens' and 'effective contributors'. The CfE also specifies 'Experiences and Outcomes' pupils are meant to achieve, and benchmarks that are meant to provide clarity on the national standards expected within each curriculum area at each level.<sup>xvi</sup> These conflicting guidelines, and the lack of consistency with which they have been implemented, has resulted in teachers spending more time on bureaucracy and less time on delivering the high quality lessons that pupils need.<sup>xvii</sup>

Tackling the problems within CfE means accepting that it is no longer fit for purpose.

**That's why the Scottish Conservatives would**

**create a new knowledge-based curriculum through our Curriculum for Aspiration.** CfE currently takes a 'progressivist' approach to education. Such an approach allows students to pursue their own learning with the help, but not the direction, of teachers. It also emphasises that a curriculum should be built around skills and competencies, not knowledge. A progressive approach to education relegates key parts of a knowledge-based education (e.g. formulas, historical data, grammar, etc.) to potential impediments to achieving skills. That is not to say that skills should be dismissed or are not important, but it is essential that students have the knowledge and competencies to succeed in whatever career they choose to pursue.

Putting knowledge and common sense back into the curriculum means taking more of a 'traditional' approach to education. This does not mean going to older curricula but rather focusing on the methods that work and are proven to deliver results, namely returning to pedagogy and the systematic acquisition of knowledge. This will be central to our Curriculum for Aspiration. Our colleagues in England have already demonstrated that this is possible. Thanks to reforms initiated under the last UK Conservative Government, England has climbed the PISA tables in maths from 27<sup>th</sup> in 2009 to 11<sup>th</sup> in 2022, in reading from 25<sup>th</sup> in 2009 to 13<sup>th</sup> in 2022, and in science from 16<sup>th</sup> in 2009 to 13<sup>th</sup> in 2022.<sup>xviii</sup>

This can be achieved in Scotland by getting teachers to deliver successful lessons. A recent report by Professor Lindsay Paterson and Bruce Robertson, the former Rector of Berwickshire High School, has shown how the curriculum can be adapted to make it content-rich through knowledge, skills, and experiences. The lack of clarity within the Broad General Education phase of the CfE has resulted in teachers giving students tasks that are more about keeping them busy, than being good for their learning. Berwickshire High School shows how a rational, content-rich curriculum ensures that students gain the knowledge needed to understand and engage with the world around them. A knowledge-based curriculum will allow children to develop the skills essential for lifelong learning and for making a meaningful



contribution to society. To achieve a portfolio of qualifications that open doors to future opportunities, and cultivate a genuine love of learning for its own sake.<sup>xix</sup> Berwickshire High School have achieved this through the ‘5Cs of a content-rich curriculum’.

These are: Clarity, which ensures that the content students learn is clear; content, so that new content links to previous lessons; challenge, so that students are consistently changed throughout all stages of their learning; collaboration, so that teaching content is discussed, debated, and agreed by a range of stakeholders; and change, which ensures that curriculum evolves over time.<sup>xx</sup>

A content-rich and knowledge-focused curriculum is central to Scotland’s future economic success, and to delivering well-rounded individuals. Every pupil should have the opportunity to aspire to improve their situation. **Our Curriculum for Aspiration will deliver for pupils and teachers and restore Scotland’s schools to their former reputation for educational excellence.**



# Letting teachers teach

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**The delivery of successful lessons depends on letting teachers teach. The SNP have completely failed to provide the extra teachers they promised, so the ability to deliver reduced contact time for teachers remains unfeasible.**

A recent survey by School Leaders Scotland (SLS) reveals that headteachers and senior staff are working an average of 53 hours per week, far exceeding contractual expectations. Some respondents reported working over 80 hours. These extended hours include tasks such as providing one-to-one support for pupils removed from class and covering for absent teachers. SLS states that most school leaders regularly work beyond their agreed terms, raising concerns about sustainability. Alarming, six in ten senior staff plan to leave the profession earlier than intended, citing factors such as rising levels of aggressive behaviour and insufficient support for pupils with Additional Support Needs (ASN).<sup>xxi</sup>

These findings are also supported by a similar survey that was conducted by the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS). The survey revealed that almost half of teachers (44%) work more than seven extra hours each week without pay, simply to keep up with their workload. That's equivalent to an additional full working day every week. Even more concerning, over one in ten teachers (11.5%) put in 15 or more extra hours weekly, amounting to two unpaid working days. Among teachers considering leaving the profession within the next five years, excessive workload is the leading factor, cited by 48% as their main reason for wanting to leave.<sup>xxii</sup>

**The Scottish Conservatives will provide teachers with greater freedom to teach.** We will cut all red tape in schools to reduce the amount of paperwork and administration that teachers must do. This will provide teachers with greater freedom to educate and ensure that their valuable time is not wasted by bureaucracy.

At the last Holyrood election, the SNP promised to cut contact time by 90 minutes a week to give teachers more time for activities such as lesson preparation and marking. The EIS believe that workload in schools was “unfair, unhealthy and unsustainable”. Teachers said they were rarely or never able to do the work, preparation and correcting they had been asked to do within their working week.<sup>xxiii</sup> Furthermore, teachers in Scotland are well above the OECD average for class-contact time. The OECD average for class-contact is 773 hours in primary and 679 in secondary. However, teachers in Scotland can expect to spend 855 hours, based on Scottish teachers' terms and conditions.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The SNP's failure to deliver this policy has been greeted with hostility by stakeholders with the general-secretary of the EIS said that the promised 90-minute reduction in class contact time was a “red line for teachers”.<sup>xxv</sup>

The SNP Government have proposed that teachers to work a “flexible” four-day teaching week. Plans also include reduced classroom contact time with pupils and agreed national minimum standards for pupil learning hours. Scotland's education Secretary Jenny Gilruth said the proposals demonstrate a “clear commitment to teachers”.<sup>xxvi</sup> The fact that the SNP have announced this just a few months away from a Scottish Parliament election demonstrates that this is nothing but another



gimmick. Indeed, it is notable that the EIS referred to this latest SNP announcement as “potentially problematic proposals on the implementation of the Scottish Government’s 2021 manifesto commitment to reduce weekly class contact time, the non-delivery of which is at the crux of an ongoing and escalating workload dispute raised by Scotland’s teachers”.<sup>xxvii</sup>

**We would explore the possibility of reducing contact hours for teachers from 22.5 hours to 20 hours a week.** This could give teachers the ability to prepare high-quality classes for their pupils and ensure they can devote more time to providing better education.

Furthermore, we would provide teachers with greater freedom to teach, by cutting red tape in schools to reduce the amount of paperwork that teachers must do. This can be achieved by making greater use of digital technology.

Reliance on supply teachers has ballooned under the SNP because they have failed to recruit and retain enough full-time teachers – leaving pupils facing disruption and taxpayers footing an ever-growing bill. Despite their promise to increase teacher numbers, they have fallen, while cuts have reduced the number of newly qualified teachers being given full-time posts. 55,100 teachers were employed in 2007, when the SNP came to power. In 2025, this number had dipped to 53,475, a decrease of 3%.<sup>xxviii</sup> In 2021, the SNP pledged to recruit 3,500 additional teachers by the end of the parliamentary term, but the most recent figures for 2025 show total teacher numbers to be over 3,600 short of the initial goal.<sup>xxix</sup>

**We would launch a campaign to attract the best people into teaching.** The teaching workforce in Scotland needs to be more academically diverse and we should encourage teachers to come from with from different career paths and not just through the education system to attract people who would not normally consider teaching, into the profession.

During the 2024/25 financial year, local authorities spent over £76 million on fill-in staff, an increase of £13.5m over the last three years.<sup>xxx</sup> With fewer people entering

the profession and more driven out, the SNP has made teaching in Scotland increasingly unsustainable.

The career structure for teachers in Scotland is broken and needs radical change. It cannot be right that a teacher reaches their top earning potential after just five years, unless they want to leave the classroom and enter management. **The Scottish Conservatives will therefore undertake a review of the career structure for teachers to ensure that they can receive improved pay after five years while remaining in the classroom.** We will also **review and enhance the leadership training that teachers receive** to ensure that they can be school and community advocates.

Many of problems faced by teachers in Scotland have been caused by the conflicting and vague guidance that is frequently issued by Education Scotland. This quango costs the Scottish taxpayer over £30 million a year, with £20 million awarded in the most recent Scottish Budget.<sup>xxxi</sup> We believe that the money spent on the quango could be better spent on improving standards in school, rather than issuing yet more guidance and paperwork for teachers to implement. That is why **the Scottish Conservatives would abolish Education Scotland.** The budget for this quango would then be spent on delivering improved learning outcomes for pupils.



# Delivering safe and constructive learning environments

**Successful lessons are not possible without teachers and pupils being able to teach and learn in safe environments. Under the SNP, Scotland's classrooms have become the most violent in Britain.**

Between March 2014 and March 2024, there were 490 reports of serious injuries to school staff in Scotland caused by violence. When adjusted for population, the rate is higher than in Wales and all English regions. The injuries include fractures, dislocations and loss of consciousness.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Furthermore, a survey by NASUWT in March 2025 found that 83% of its members said the number of violent and abusive pupils has increased over the previous twelve months. It also found that more than a third of NASUWT members had been assaulted with a weapon, and 32% of the pupils involved with weapons were aged between four and seven.<sup>xxxiii</sup> There are also huge issues with bullying in our schools. Between August 2020 and June 2025, a total of 64,077 bullying incidents were logged across 25 local authorities.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

In June 2025 the Scottish Government published guidance on pupil behaviour which stated that exclusion should only be used as a 'last resort'. It also stated that violent pupils should be given 'laminated set of bullet points, telling them to think about their behaviour to remind and support them to step away, seek help and follow an agreed, and rehearsed process' and tackling unsafe behaviour by having 'a conversation to jointly problem solve

with the child'.<sup>xxxv</sup> Restorative approaches to schools' discipline are ineffective, and the NASUWT survey in March 2025 found the SNP's guidance was not being implemented and that only 4% of schools or employers shared details of these guidelines with their staff.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

It is common sense that pupils who are disruptive or break the rules in schools should face consequences for their actions. This view is shared by stakeholders and a report by the Commission on School Reform advises that 'schools should not be made to feel that the use of exclusion is contrary to national policy and likely to incur official disapproval'. It points to concerns that exclusion has effectively been outlawed in parts of Scotland and is no longer an option for heads even in extreme circumstances.<sup>xxxvii</sup> The SNP's emphasis on restorative justice in schools has diluted the authority of our teachers and has failed to tackle the growing prevalence of violence in school.

**The Scottish Conservatives support restoring clear authority to school leadership by giving the power of exclusion to headteachers.** This would replace current system in which this power is held by local authorities, to support safe, orderly and effective learning environments. As those with direct responsibility for their schools, headteachers are best placed to make decisions on how to maintain discipline in their schools. Empowering headteachers would strengthen accountability, support consistent discipline and bring Scotland more closely into line with practice elsewhere in the UK, while retaining appropriate safeguards for pupils.



Having a constructive learning environment means we have to ensure that students with Additional Support Needs (ASN) have a positive learning experience. The SNP's presumption on mainstreaming pupils with ASN has resulted in their learning needs not being met. This, in turn, has resulted in some pupils acting out through violent and disruptive behaviour. The number of pupils identified with ASN has increased markedly since 2010 and there continues to be year on year increases. Furthermore, in 2025, out of the 299,445 pupils identified as having ASN, 274,368, or 92%, spent all their time in mainstream classes<sup>xxxviii</sup>. This has not resulted in better outcomes for students as across Scotland pupils with ASN have a below average attendance rate, are around five times more likely to be temporarily excluded from school and are less likely to achieve expected CfE and progress to a positive destination<sup>xxxix</sup>.

In 2020, the Scottish Government published Angela Morgan's review of the implementation of Additional Support for Learning (ASL) across early learning and childcare centres, primary, secondary, and special schools. It had four recommendations for delivery: values driven leadership; an open and robust culture of communication, support and challenge; resource alignment; and methodology for delivery of knowledge learning and practice development. The Scottish Government and COSLA accepted all the recommendations of the review, and the Additional Support for Learning Project Board was set up.<sup>xl</sup>

This presumption on mainstreaming has not delivered for pupils with ASN. Audit Scotland has gone as far to say that that the SNP Government have "not planned effectively for the potential impact of this inclusive approach to ASL. It is not specifically reflected in funding formulas for education and education planning, such as training for teachers and support staff, class sizes and the design of school building"<sup>xli</sup>. Similar issues were also flagged by the Scottish Parliament's Education, Children and Young People's Committee during its recent inquiry into ASN provision in Scotland. The Committee heard of the difficulties experienced by parents and carers in getting the correct support for their child. This included long delays in diagnosis

and access to support services such as mental health services and speech and language therapy. Parents and carers spoke of not being listened to particularly where they felt that the presumption of mainstreaming was not meeting the needs of their child.<sup>xlii</sup> We would implement the recommendations of the Morgan Review into additional support for learning and continue to grow the support staff workforce. This would include improving data collection on the composition of this vital workforce and formalising the role of pupil support assistants. **We want to see Scottish Ministers undertake a national review into the implementation of mainstreaming policy as well as the availability of specialist additional school places across councils.**

Delivering constructive learning environments means ensuring that students can enjoy part of their education outdoors. The Scottish Conservatives have led the way on this, and it is thanks to Scottish Conservative MSP Liz Smith's Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Act that all pupils in state and grant-aided schools will have the chance to experience at least four nights and five days of residential outdoor education during their school career.<sup>xliii</sup> The provisions within this Act have been welcomed, with the Outward Bound Trust saying that 'Scotland has backed that belief in law, giving every young person the chance to take part in a residential adventure'.<sup>xliv</sup> Over the course of the next parliament, **the Scottish Conservatives will strive to ensure that the provisions of the Act are implemented so that all pupils can enjoy outdoor education.**

Ensuring pupils have a well-rounded education means working in cooperation with parents and carers. Recent work by Parenting Across Scotland has revealed that poverty, mental health and education are the among the biggest issues faced by parents and carers in Scotland. Parents also referenced inaccessible childcare provision, unaffordable childcare (especially among children ineligible for the 3-to-4-year early years childcare expansion), and concerns about the relevance of the CfE.<sup>xlv</sup> It is widely accepted that good parenting in the family home can lead to pupils having a positive experience of school. The *Triple P – Positive Parenting*



*Programme* is now an internationally recognised programme that aims to create supportive family environments, and to prevent, as well as treat, behavioural and emotional problems in children and teenagers.<sup>xlvi</sup> To better support parents and carers, we would issue guidance to allow local authorities to provide Triple P programmes for parents and carers, and to work with the schools to ensure that the effects of positive parenting are carried through into the classroom.

However, it also needs to be recognised that traditional educational pathways do not always provide the best outcomes for some students. Around 15% of young people are leaving school with no qualifications – we want to change that.<sup>xlvii</sup> **That's why we would lower the school leaving age to 14 or 15 by creating partnerships between schools and colleges to ensure that pupils who are not suited to traditional educational pathways are required either to take an apprenticeship or go on a college course.** Our proposal would give more opportunities to young people by allowing them to take up a college course, training programme or an apprenticeship. They would only be allowed to leave school if they had a college course or apprenticeship lined up that is better suited to their skill set and would still be required to obtain a certain level of English and Maths skills until they were 16. Our proposal would require legislation and as with any other Bill it would be compliant with UK law and ensure that there are appropriate protections for young people in non-school environments. We would ensure the Bill gives more opportunities to young people who want to use their different skills, rather than be stuck in a system that is failing them.

This would give young people the option to pursue a different path if traditional academic education isn't right for them. This would allow them to take part in hybrid learning through a college placement or apprenticeships better suited to their talents. By developing this proposal with businesses, we can boost young people's skills and ensure Scotland's economy is fit for the future.<sup>xlviii</sup>

Delivering a constructive learning environment also means clamping down on the use of mobile

phones in school, which both distract students from the work they should be doing, and provide a forum for online bullying and social media content to be shared. Scottish Government data show that 62% of 8 to 11-year-olds own their own mobile phone. This rises to 96% for 12 to 15-year-olds.<sup>xlix</sup>

Most of the pupils are looking at their phones or tablets when they should not. Around 88% of secondary staff experience pupils using or looking at mobile phones or tablets when they shouldn't at least once a day, and 70% experience pupils going on sites they shouldn't when digital technologies are being used at least one a day compared with 12% and 14% of primary staff respectively.<sup>1</sup> That's why the Scottish Conservatives **support a national ban on mobile phones in schools.** There is strong evidence of just how distracting mobile phones can be, and how disruptive to pupils' ability to learn. This issue is of such importance to our children's ability to learn that there must be a clear national policy in place about what is to be expected in our schools. **That is why we would introduce a Schools (Phone Ban) Bill so that local authorities have the ability to ban mobile phones in schools.**

Children are also spending more time on social media than ever before and are often exposed to violent or pornographic content. We would never allow our children to be exposed to these kinds of dangers in the real world. **That's why the Scottish Conservatives support the plans outlined by our UK colleagues to ban access to social media for under-16s.**<sup>li</sup>



# A new approach to school provision

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**Delivering actual improvements in school standards means addressing the ways that schooling is currently provided. The provision of most primary and secondary schools in Scotland remains under the remit of local authorities. While there are some schools that operate well under this model, having local authorities control schools can stagnate, rather than stimulate, any attempt at school reform.**

Under the SNP, Scottish schools - once celebrated worldwide for their excellence - have experienced a marked decline. Public dissatisfaction has surged and remains at record levels. According to the annual Scottish Household Survey, only 69% of adults say they are satisfied with their local schools, with some council areas reporting figures as low as 50%. While this percentage has remained unchanged since 2022 and 2023, it represents a steep drop from the 85% satisfaction rate recorded in 2011.<sup>iii</sup>

Our colleagues in England have already shown that a fundamental rethink on how schools are provided can lead to improved outcomes when it comes to educational performance. The expansion of the Academy system, and the introduction of Free Schools, has provided an international benchmark that other countries look to for example. Academies receive funding directly from the government and can be run by Multi-Academy Trusts. They have more control over how they do things, for example they do not have to follow the national curriculum and can set their own term times. Some schools choose to become academies. If a school funded by the local authority is judged as

'inadequate' by Ofsted then it must become an academy.<sup>liii</sup>

Free schools are funded by the government but are not run by the local authority, and have more control over how they do things. Free schools are run on a not-for-profit basis and can be set up by groups like: charities, universities, teachers, parents, and businesses.<sup>liv</sup> You only have to look at the success of the Michaela Community School in Northwest London, and Mercia School in Sheffield, to see how the creation of Free Schools and Academies outside of local authority control can lead to better results and improved outcomes for students from the most socially deprived background.<sup>lv</sup>

Within Scotland, the success of Jordanhill School in Glasgow which is the only school that is directly funded, or 'grant-aided' by the Scottish Government, shows that allowing schools to operate outside of local authority control can work in Scotland. Jordanhill has been named the best high school in Scotland for nine years in a row and a record of 94% of pupils leave the school achieving the Scottish Government's target of five Highers or equivalents. Jordanhill's position where it is independent of local authority control resulted from its funding stream being transferred from the Scottish Office with the advent of devolution, but its success, and independent governing structure shows that giving schools the opportunity to operate outside of local authority control is worth consideration.<sup>lvi</sup>

The Scottish Conservatives believe that a new model of school provision should be considered for Scotland. **That is why we would give schools the option to opt out of local authority control with their agreement, and become grant-**



**aided schools, like Jordanhill School.** These schools would be directly funded by the Scottish Government, rather than local authorities and would have greater freedoms on how they teach the curriculum, set the structure of their school days and give parents more say over the overall learning direction of the school. By introducing new models of school provision, headteachers and teachers get the opportunity to assume greater responsibility over their schools.

Giving headteachers more power over the administration of their schools is something that is long overdue. The Scottish Conservatives don't only want to empower headteachers to enforce discipline in their schools, we want to extend this empowerment to other aspects of school governance. Currently, local authorities have extensive control over schools and the decisions that are made within them. Councils hold statutory responsibility for managing, funding, and resourcing state schools, ensuring adequate provision, setting admissions and catchment areas, and employing staff. Councils decide where schools are built, maintain buildings, and determine if schools should open, close, or merge.<sup>lvii</sup>

Although headteachers manage spending within the budgets they are granted by local authorities, and are responsible for leadership, management, curriculum direction, behaviour policies, and staff development, their ability to act effectively is limited. A survey released in 2025 by School Leaders Scotland has highlighted the severe challenges being faced by headteachers, deputies, and others in leadership roles in Scottish secondary schools. Responses to the survey highlighted a wide range of problems and concerns, including a lack of business managers in some areas, the use of centralised recruitment systems by certain councils, the impact of cuts to council support teams, and the provision of inadequate financial tools. Head teachers also expressed frustration over the continuous scrutiny of school by local authorities, drawing particular attention to the bureaucratic burden of data collection and reporting.<sup>lviii</sup>

Headteachers should be trusted to make decisions that are in the best interests of

their schools. That is why we would empower headteachers by enhancing their authority over budgetary decisions and the management of staff. We would transfer powers from local authorities to give headteachers complete oversight of school budgets, along with the hiring and firing of staff. We believe that those who are responsible for the daily administration of school are best placed to take the major decisions within a school.

This is particularly important when it comes to the provision of rural schools which have been among the worst hit when it comes to closures. Scottish Conservative research has shown that since the SNP entered government there has been a net loss of almost 280 schools. Specifically, 393 schools have closed and a further 66 mothballed, while in the same period 180 have opened.<sup>lix</sup>

Furthermore, rural schools are suffering an exodus of staff. Analysis conducted by Scottish Teachers for Permanence found that only 12% of teachers interviewed are moving into permanent posts. Almost half said they face either supply-only work or unemployment for 2025-26, and that posts in rural schools are becoming increasingly hard to come by.<sup>lx</sup> Rural Scotland is already suffering from depopulation, and the absence of local schools will only make this worse.<sup>lxi</sup> The Scottish Conservatives believe that more needs to be done to make rural schools sustainable. That is why **we would explore options to allow communities in rural areas to take over their local school to ensure that they can remain open and teachers can be recruited.**

The UK Labour Government's decision to introduce VAT on fee-paying schools from 1 January 2025 has had a detrimental impact on Scotland. UK Labour Ministers had argued removing the VAT exemption would benefit the wider education sector, including the 94% of pupils who attend state schools.

This ideologically driven policy is costing jobs, failing pupils—particularly those with additional needs—and placing significant extra pressure on state schools. A recent census by the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS)



revealed a decline of 3,000 pupils over the past two years. There has also been a drop in enrolment of 10.3% in Edinburgh and 10.2% in Glasgow since VAT on fees was announced.<sup>lxii</sup> Independent analysis from BIGGAR Economics warns that once pupil numbers fall by 13%, VAT on fees ceases to generate revenue and instead becomes a net cost to public finances. The same report found that Scottish independent schools contribute more than £500 million to the economy, support 12,000 jobs nationwide, and save taxpayers £200 million in education costs.<sup>lxiii</sup>

The head of one of Scotland's top independent schools has accused the UK government of running a "live experiment" on children's education. Simon Brian, principal of St Leonards School in St Andrews, warned that introducing VAT on private school fees could push the sector to a critical tipping point.<sup>lxiv</sup> As more families are unable to afford the fees for independent school, it will push pupils into a state school sector that is unable to cope with the increased numbers. SCIS figures have revealed that independent school rolls have fallen by around 10% since the 2022/23 year, with the chief executive recently stating that 'We warned the UK Government that imposing VAT on fees would damage state education in Scotland, and harm the economy, and unfortunately we have been proved correct'.<sup>lxv</sup> Labour's raid on the independent school sector has been driven by the politics of envy and has failed to deliver the improvements that were promised. **This is why the Scottish Conservatives support the reversal of this failed policy and believe that VAT should be removed from independent school fees.**

Independent schools had already begun to suffer under the SNP long before the UK Labour Government imposed VAT on fees. The Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Act 2020 removed the 100% charitable rates relief for most mainstream independent schools in Scotland.<sup>lxvi</sup> Although the implementation of the Act was delayed until 2022, independent schools have come under increased pressure over the past four years with several schools, such as Cedars School in Greenock and Kilgraston School in Bridge of Earn, having closed permanently.<sup>lxvii</sup>

**We would also restore charitable status to independent schools meaning they would once again be entitled to business rates relief.**



# Conclusion

A good education provides pupils with the best start in life. It is common sense that pupils should be expected to leave school with the knowledge and skills that they need to thrive. This approach not only ensures that pupils leave school as well-rounded individuals, but it also benefits the economy by ensuring that the workforce is fit for the future and can deliver the economic growth that Scotland's needs.

Sadly, the SNP are content to let uniform mediocrity continue in our schools. The Scottish Conservatives believe that education should be centred around instilling aspiration in pupils and the plans that we have outlined here are the first steps to raise school standards. The acquisition of knowledge served Scotland well in the past, and by bringing it back we ensure that our schools are ready for the future. By measures such as the mandating of phonics, and returning knowledge to the Curriculum for Excellence, we can reverse the downward trend in Scottish education.

Returning knowledge means giving our teachers more capacity to teach. That's why we would look to reduce class contact time, abolish

Education Scotland, and give teachers greater capacity to do what they do best. This also means giving the authority to deal with violent and disruptive pupils by mandating the use of exclusions and banning mobile phones.

However, we also need to support pupils whose needs are not catered by traditional education pathways. That is why we support a review of the mainstreaming of ASN pupils in schools and lowering the school leaving age to 14 or 15, which would give young people the option to pursue a different path if traditional academic education isn't right for them.

Raising school standards also means that we have to consider new ways to provide schools. Allowing schools to leave local authority control, if the two are in agreement, can ensure that other schools can experience the success that Jordanhill School has experienced.

A good education is the best start that we can give to everyone, and the plans that we have outlined here will ensure that we can raise school standards in Scotland to where they were before.



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