

Prescribing the minimum annual number of learning hours: consultation

Connect is a long-standing independent parents' organisation and the only Scottish charity which is dedicated to supporting parental engagement in education. We provide membership services to Parent Councils and PTAs, as well as offering advice and information to individual parents/carers about any aspect of the education of their child or the wider education system.

We support education professionals in developing their skills and understanding around effective partnership working with families and the wider community through online professional learning via the Connect Family Engagement Academy. Our evidence-based approaches reflect both the recognised significant role of families in the learning of their children and young people, and the stated policies and legislation which pertain in Scotland.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government's consultation on prescribing the minimum annual number of learning hours. We ran a survey of parents/carers, and you can see the results below.

We take the description 'learning hours' to mean direct teacher-led contact time ie learning hours and teacher hours are the same thing. We checked with Scottish Government officers to ascertain that this was what was meant by 'learning hours' and they replied: "Learning hours are the period of teaching that learners receive during the school day and for a teacher supervising the class this period would be the same as the "teaching hours" they deliver." It is important to ensure that local authorities do not cut other parts of the school day or other school-related experiences as part of cost-cutting measures going forward.

Parents who responded to our survey are broadly in favour of the proposals for the prescribed hours. However, there are concerns about the potential exceptions and there need to be clear expectations and explicit guidelines on what these circumstances can be. Parents are much less confident of this aspect of the proposals. There is also concern there could be a negative impact on pupils with additional support needs and that the lack of definition in the wellbeing exception could lead to local authorities/schools making unilateral decisions to reduce hours for individuals which would not be in the interests of the individual's or their families.

If these proposals are taken forward, we would expect parents to have a further opportunity to be formally consulted on the range of exceptions and on the detail of the proposals.

Connect
12 June 2023

Connect Survey on Minimum Learning Hours

The survey ran from 5 May to 5 June with 243 responses from across 31 local authorities.

At what stage/age is your child/young person? (if you have more than one child at the same school, please tick all ages that apply)

- Early years/nursery 12% (28)
- P1 - P3 35% (85)

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- P4 - P7 49% (119)
- S1 - S3 41% (99)
- S4 -S6 26% (64)

Should the Scottish Government set in law the minimum learning hours pupils in Scotland should receive within the school day?

- Yes 68% (164)
- No 17% (42)
- Not Sure 15% (35)

The consultation proposes that primary school pupils should receive 950 learning hours a year, which would average five hours a day across 190 days a year. Do you agree with these minimum annual learning hours for primary schools?

- Yes 70% (168)
- No 23% (55)
- Not Sure 7% (17)

For secondary pupils, they should receive 1045 learning hours a year, which would average five and a half hours a day across 190 days a year. Do you agree with these minimum annual learning hours for secondary schools?

- Yes 69% (165)
- No 22% (52)
- Not Sure 10% (23)

The learning hours proposal would allow for circumstances when local authorities may provide fewer than the minimum number of hours. Do you agree with these exceptions?

Where the pupil's wellbeing would be adversely affected

- Yes 64% (153)
- No 26% (63)
- Not Sure 10% (24)

Where matters outwith the authority's control make it impracticable to make the prescribed hours

- Yes 45% (108)
- No 33% (80)
- Not Sure 21% (51)

Where other circumstances that Ministers may prescribe by regulations apply

- Yes 33% (80)
- No 36% (86)
- Not Sure 31% (73)

Parent Voices

Respondents were asked if they had any comments, which came under the following broad themes:

Need for more clarity on terms

'It would need to have a process or guidance in place as to what 'well-being adversely affected' would mean...'

'Yes, any curtailing of a child's education is damaging and will have a negative impact. The exceptions are vague - no clear description or useful information given. To have exceptions that are not clearly defined leaves them open to abuse or/and misuse.'

'Much more detail on the exceptions should be provided. Definition of 'outwith control' needs to be clearly defined. Always with both parties agreeing. Parents/child and school.'

Possible impact on pupils with additional support needs

'My daughter went to a special school, and my concern is that wellbeing will be used as an excuse to reduce the number of learning hours. There is already a reduction with when the buses arrive, and how early they pack up. Special schools should have the same requirements as other schools.'

'I work with looked after children and also have experience of children and young people who have additional support needs. Often due to a lack of resources to support learning difficulties or behaviour needs both groups can be put on a reduced timetable. Or our service will receive a call to collect a young person in our care due to their behaviour. I feel that all children should receive their full entitlement to their education and that distressed or challenging behaviours should not impact this.'

'Concern that exceptions could be misused to escape requirement to meet the needs of pupils with complex barriers to learning.'

Potential abuse of exceptions

'Yes, the legislative obligation will become secondary to other "matters" most likely to make things more efficient in terms of funding and there for designed to be as efficient for the LA and not the children.'

'I would be worried about cash strapped local authorities constantly looking for loose reasons aligned to these exceptions to get around having to provide the minimal hours required.'

'I think if there are exceptions then there has to be a legal catch all clause to ensure the exceptions can't be abused. I am also not sure how to answer the hours questions because don't know the impact on young learners. My concern about exceptions is misuse. Perhaps exceptions need to be assessed on a case by case basis. I have worked in support and I would not like to see children with needs be short changed due to an exception.'

Concern this will lead to longer hours

'Children are exhausted in the afternoon. Extending the day beyond 5hrs is ill-advised.'

'The minimum of 190 days should be maintained to ensure students and teacher are not forced by authorities to have 7 hours school days, which likely would have a detrimental/adverse effect on the learning and wellbeing of students and teachers.'

'My only hesitation with setting set hours is the chance of those hours being increased exponentially. Children and teachers are already in school for several hours a day. Teachers need to be there before and after school hours; this could potentially extend their already unmanageable workload, thus impacting on work-life balance and mental health.'

Concern this will lead to less hours

'Less time routines at school can have an impact on poor families and also working parents due to childcare.'

'Minimum hours should be set legally but I feel that secondary school hours are set too low and if school were not meeting the minimum hours, these would need to be met with less occasional days etc.'

'We are not happy about cutting learning hours or having half school days because of the council wasting our money on totally useless road works like cycle lane cones -midline crossing cages and now pointless road narrowing and traffic lights easing Millions in this way! Is this for 15 minute Cities?'

Other concerns about setting hours

'Every pupil is an individual and I feel that there is no need to set a minimum amount of hours. Schools should have the ability to set hours to suit needs of their pupils.'

'I believe the minimum should be set slightly lower than this. I know councils are struggling financially and are looking to cut costs. I would much rather the school week was a little shorter but the standard of education remained, rather than them having to cut staff, services or opportunities.'

'I have huge concerns over having a legal number of hours. The world of work is moving to high quality work over clocking in for set hours this approach seems misaligned with worlds of work preparation. It is also likely to add yet more bureaucracy for schools and local authorities to 'prove' the hours are delivered. Finally, what are you counting as learning - a half day of work experience may offer an individual deeper learning than a week of enforced class time to tick an hours of learning box - is this being recognised?'

'This is subjective depending on the pupil, setting hours of teaching is not the correct way forward as every pupil learns at different speeds at whilst the level may be good for one it may not be as good for the next one.'

'Learning hours as a metric is fine but I would like to look at teacher student ratio which will have a greater influence on learning'

Issues with current learning

'I have more concerns about putting the emphasis on hours over quality of learning. If this is pushed through it should have flexibility in the model.'

'Yes. Children learn best through play, and some may not class that as learning but children up to the age of 10 should be getting at least 5 hours a day of imaginative play. This is how they learn, test their abilities and limitations & even learn about themselves. Extra time sitting down & 'learning' goes against child based learning. It focuses too much on academics, which is not all that matters in children.'

'My child regularly comes home saying she learnt nothing at school, too many movies provided to children, staffing issues which prevents learning and raffle ticket distributions that take the children away from actual learning. This needs to stop.'

Scheduling of school week

'In times when the economy is struggling bringing in uncertainties around school times make it difficult for parents/carers and employers to make work patterns match. This would have significant negative economic impact on society. So while the education budget might go a

bit further more people will be unable to work. I also have deep concerns for children's who have ASN as they (and their carers) need patterns and consistency.'

'I am aware there is talk of dropping school to a 4-day week, unless employers drop employees to a 4 day week for the same pay this is preposterous idea as it would put more financial burden and stress on parents as to logistics of where their children will go on the 5th day'

'In primary school they have a 6-hour day with 5 hours learning I believe. Making days longer to have one short day on a Friday sounds great but as a full time working parent I would worry about childcare cover.'