

Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee Inquiry into Subject Choices

March 2019

Introduction

Connect is a long-standing independent parents' organisation and the only Scottish charity which is dedicated to parental engagement in education. We provide membership services to Parent Councils and PTAs, as well as offering advice and information to individual parents who have concerns 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.

Connect is happy to respond to the Education and Skills Committee's inquiry into subject choices. We conducted an online survey of parents, which we promoted through our social media channels and Parents' Voice survey group. Eighty-five respondents provided us with their experiences of their child/children's subject choices, and we have drawn from these comments to inform our response, using parents' own words as much as possible, along with the questions and comments we have received from parents over recent years. What is most evident from our survey is that there is a wide range of opinion among parents. This reflects the range of experiences in different schools and local authorities, as well as how parents and young people have varying priorities with regard to subject choices.

Decrease/increase in subjects

Our survey asked parents if they were aware if there had been recent changes to the number and range of subjects a pupil could study in a school year. In relation to the number of subjects a young person can study in a school year, 18% said there had been an increase, 16% said there had been a decrease, 26% said there had been no change, and 40% said they did not know if there had been any changes. In relation to the range of choices available, 27% said there had been an increase, 18% said there had been a decrease, 17% said no change, and 38% did not know.

Some parents commented on changes as follows:

"Oldest son did 8 Nat5s, younger son doing 7 and I think 7 is about right - enough to get a breadth of subjects but not so many the curriculum is too cramped."

"Our school has recently moved from maximum of 6 subjects in S4 to maximum of 7 subjects. This was due to concerns about early specialisation and reduction in pupils choosing less popular subjects which gave pupils a very narrow range from which to choose Higher subjects. In order to be able to offer 7 subjects in S4 the school has had to reduce the number of subjects in S3 in order that the National courses could commence in S3 so that the course content could be covered."

Connect

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"Too many compulsory subjects to fit into a school week. Doesn't allow children to keep their options open. Would suggest allowing up to 10 subjects to Nat 5 equivalent level for academic pupils. Then pupils can specialise for highers/advanced highers in S5/S6. Which would give them a better basis if they wish to change direction in later life."

On making choices

"Our S3 have been asked to submit their choices within the past week, BEFORE the school has held a Choices Info evening for parents and carers, should be the other way round surely!"

"They are asked to choose too soon and then offered a limited choice. My daughter was limited to one social science subject and forced to take a computer subject that she didn't want. It is not in the interest of the child to force them to take subjects they don't like."

"We were not happy that it is government policy that children are to take drama, music or art, this is OK in 1st and second year but a waste in third year, and would have limited my child's choice, much better for them to take a second language or science, so we had to fight to have this choice. My child has no interest in the arts and is of no use for their future, so if this is the policy, this needs to be looked at, as I will be making the same complaint for my S1 child."

"Allowances always made for pupils wishing to take 3 sciences but unable to take 3 creative subjects at Nat 5 level. Unable to take music & drama together also."

Availability

Parents highlighted the issues caused by a lack of teachers for specific subjects and the number of pupils needed to request the subject for courses to run.

On pupil uptake:

"Too many people wanting to do the Higher in S5 so asked to wait until S6 to do Higher Chemistry and Physics. Made the experience much harder (with probable lower grades)"

"Pupils may choose a subject at one level not knowing if it will run at the next level. E.g. choosing Spanish to study in S3 not knowing if numbers will be enough for it to run as a N5 class the following year. Knowing this, pupils may not choose Spanish for S3, thus lowering the chance it can run at N5 for others who did take the risk of choosing it. If a school offers a subject at S3, for example, it should commit to running a N5 class (and by doing so increase the number of pupils opting for it). This is timely as a report had just been published saying language teaching in schools is at an all time low."

"Music, drop in numbers due to cost earlier on"

On availability of teachers:

"Pressures on some subjects e.g. lack of computing teachers, mean the school may not be able to offer a course, but young people can usually travel to another school for that subject."

"Decline in languages as not many people requesting and no teacher availability. Disasters with Home Ec. too - our school had no teacher for 2 years."

"School too small and teachers unqualified to take certain subjects e.g. human biology so therefore not offered"

"AH English was also unavailable this year. Computing is not running next year at any level. Both due to lack of teaching staff."

"Home Ec. - Fabric and Textile is now dropped due to lack of teachers."

Timetables

Even if the desired subject is offered by the school, parents reported that timetable clashes affected the choices available. Many parents highlighted the column method of timetabling, where pupils pick from a list and so there is a risk desired subjects might appear in the same column, as a barrier to desired subjects:

"I'm not sure if she will get her preferred choices as you are supposed to choose one subject from each column and the columns don't reflect the subjects she is naturally good at - she's naturally good at the arts and not at tech, but looks like she will be forced to drop an art subject and choose a technical one. We will probably fight this."

"Could not take French because the way choices were in columns to choose from. Had to sacrifice a language in order to do both sciences she wanted to take."

"Believe a large part of subject choice is the restrictions by the columns in the timetabling so whilst 'choices' are made these are not necessarily 'first choices'"

"My son was lucky enough to get to do higher geography at another school in Edinburgh due to a clash with other subjects. In 6th year the school adjusted his timetable to help him get his choice. However there is a clear restriction in choice and I now feel that my daughter is choosing some subjects that are not ideal due to choice restriction."

The traditional 'column' approach to subject choices has always caused issues for young people. At Connect we have long argued for a more creative and flexible approach – one which matches the promise of Curriculum for Excellence. There are examples of different approaches which work, such as Preston Lodge High School in East Lothian which has moved away from the column structure and instead pupils are free to select their choices and rate them by preference.¹ Subject teaching is then matched to demand and a flexible approach adopted to class and year structures so that different levels may be taught together, with young people from different year groups.

Conclusion

Our survey flagged up the following requests from parents:

- More flexible timetabling to access courses which build on young people's strengths (e.g. expressive arts, social sciences, sciences, languages)
- Consistency of course offer i.e. if a subject is offered for S3 choices, it should be available in S4/S5/S6
- Clear, timeous information about subject choices, courses and career guidance

However, the issues described in this submission are not new. In September 2014, Connect (then Scottish Parent Teacher Council) responded to the Scottish Parliament's Education Committee's enquiry on Curriculum for Excellence, describing concerns parents had raised

¹ https://issuu.com/prestonlodge.net/docs/making_choices_for_the_senior_phase p.24

with us in regards to subject choices. Shortages of subject qualified teachers and cuts leading to a reduction in the range of subjects expected were one of the issues highlighted.² Five years later and these continue to be a point of concern of parents.

Further, the Broad General Education phase (up until S3) continues to be widely disregarded, with narrowing of the curriculum taking place early in secondary school, and in some cases SQA qualification commencing in S3.

This, combined with Inflexible approaches to timetabling and the well-documented challenges of recruiting and maintaining subject specialists, mean the ideal of CfE is still a long way away.

Eileen Prior

Executive Director

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² SPTC submission to the Scottish Parliament Education and Culture Committee enquiry into Curriculum for Excellence: National Qualifications, September 2014