

Key messages

# School education



 ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

Prepared by Audit Scotland  
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## What's this report about?


Education is fundamental in shaping a child's life. Getting a good education improves the likelihood of earning a higher income, enjoying better health and living longer. An effective school education system is an important factor in supporting the Scottish Government's strategic objectives to be a 'Smarter Scotland' and a 'Wealthier and Fairer Scotland'. Better educational outcomes are a strong predictor of economic growth, and success in a global economy means that Scotland needs to keep pace with the best countries in the world.

School education accounts for a significant proportion of local government spending, and a number of important education policy developments have taken place in recent years, such as the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). Gaining qualifications (attainment) is still an integral part of CfE and the education system, but CfE also aims to ensure pupils develop a range of skills for living and working in the wider world (wider achievement).

There has been no independent evaluation of how much councils spend on education and what this delivers in terms of improved attainment and wider achievement for pupils. 2014 is the first year in which pupils are sitting new qualifications introduced as part of CfE. Comparisons with previous years will not be possible for some time. This audit is therefore timely as it provides an assessment of attainment over the last decade and identifies how effectively councils made improvements during this time.

Our audit assessed how efficiently and effectively councils are using their resources to maximise pupil achievement in schools. We examined:

- how much councils spend on school education and what they spend it on
- how effectively councils are driving forward improvement in pupil achievement
- how efficiently councils are using their resources to maximise pupil achievement.

There is a range of attainment measures used within Scottish education. We have selected ten of these to examine the range of performance across the entire senior phase, S4-S6. The selected measures are closely aligned to the measures that councils report to their own education committees ([Appendix 1, main report](#))(PDF) .

The report highlights examples of good practice from a range of councils which have made the most improvements in raising levels of attainment in schools and makes recommendations to drive forward improvement.

## Key messages

- 1** In 2012/13, councils spent £4.8 billion on education services, of which £3.8 billion was spent on primary and secondary education. Around two-thirds of this expenditure (68 per cent) was on staff costs. Councils' spending on education fell by five per cent in real terms between 2010/11 and 2012/13, largely as a result of employing fewer staff. Councils' education services are likely to continue to face budgetary pressures, and they need to be alert to the potential impact of increased workloads on remaining staff.
- 2** Performance has improved against all ten of the attainment measures we examined over the last decade. However, there is significant variation in attainment between individual councils, schools, and groups of pupils; and there is a considerable gap between Scotland and the top performing countries. Current measures at both national and council level focus on attainment of secondary pupils at S4-S6 level. There are no comparable measures available at a council and national level on wider achievement, or the performance of pupils from P1-S3.
- 3** Levels of deprivation have a large influence on attainment. Some schools have achieved better attainment results than their levels of deprivation would indicate, suggesting that the gap between the lowest and highest performing schools cannot be wholly attributed to different levels of deprivation. Closing the gap in performance between schools is likely to be critical to improving overall attainment levels.
- 4** Councils that have made the most improvements have focused on areas such as developing leadership skills, and improving both teacher quality and systems for monitoring and tracking pupil data. There are also increasing opportunities for pupils to develop a wide range of skills for living and working in the wider world. Councils are starting to target resources to improve both


attainment and wider achievement but there is scope to improve strategic planning and strengthen the role of elected members in holding education services to account.

## Recommendations

### Councils should:

- ensure they fully understand why levels of attainment vary between their schools and different groups of pupils
- develop and implement strategies to reduce the gaps in performance between the highest and lowest-performing schools
- continue to work with the Scottish Government and Education Scotland to develop a suite of agreed performance measures which would provide an overall picture of educational attainment and achievement across Scotland
- review the sufficiency of information provided to education committees on attainment at S4-S6, pupil performance between P1-S3 and wider achievement. They should also ensure committees have the time and support to adequately challenge and hold to account education services
- develop more coordinated approaches to gathering and recording information on the range of wider achievement activities offered in schools, including the levels of pupil participation and the outcomes they achieve. This will help councils to scrutinise performance and ensure resources are being used as efficiently as possible
- ensure education strategic documents contain clear priorities and actions that set out what is to be achieved in the short, medium and long term. Performance management arrangements should monitor outcomes and report regularly on delivery against strategic objectives, such as raising attainment among the lowest-performing pupils
- consistently use the Scottish Local Government Benchmarking Framework to compare their performance against other councils, and share good practice to improve educational attainment and wider achievement
- fully assess the potential long-term impact on attainment and wider achievement of budget reductions
- monitor and act on the impact of revised working practices and staff reductions across all affected groups (eg, teachers, administrative staff, classroom assistants) on staff wellbeing by, for example, monitoring sickness absence levels, and through specific questions in staff surveys.

## What happens now?

The full report can be accessed on our website [www.audit-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk) . The Accounts Commission is keen to see the issues raised in this audit further discussed by the general public and a wide range of public bodies and interested parties.

We will also monitor progress against our recommendations through our audit work.

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This report is available in PDF and RTF formats, along with a podcast summary at:

[www.audit-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk) 

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