

PE2195/B: Establish a kindergarten stage in Scottish education

Petitioner written submission, 24 November 2025

Introduction

The response from the Scottish Government to Petition 2195 addresses two primary areas relevant to the petition: the implementation of Realising the Ambition and the significant structural changes that would result from introducing a kindergarten stage into Scotland's education system. This expanded commentary will address each of these points directly. Furthermore, there are several crucial aspects underpinning the argument for a kindergarten stage that have not been addressed in the Government's response. These are highlighted for the Committee's consideration.

Realising the Ambition

The Scottish Government acknowledges the vital role of play-based learning and notes that the approach is underpinned by the principles set out in Realising the Ambition. We concur with this recognition and affirm that Realising the Ambition is an excellent and valuable document. However, it is insufficient on its own. Five years after its publication in 2020, the Government is still investigating how to accelerate progress in embedding its principles. Although the Government claims that Realising the Ambition has been embraced across early years, early learning and childcare (ELC), and primary schools, there is no published evidence regarding the extent to which the guidance has been implemented. In contrast, evidence from Upstart members—mainly early years and primary education practitioners—suggests that the adoption of Realising the Ambition is inconsistent and that other policy drivers may hinder its implementation. Importantly, the proposal for a kindergarten stage in Scottish education represents a more fundamental change than simply implementing Realising the Ambition.

Need for Structural Change

Currently, Scotland's education system includes a transition period for children aged four or five, during which they move from nursery settings focused on play to Primary One, where the centrality of play in the curriculum varies. There is a pressing need for structural change in early years and primary education to fully harness children's natural inclination to learn through play and nurture, which will also facilitate a single ethos required for the focus on play centred activity. These objectives can best be achieved by establishing a kindergarten stage for children aged three to seven years, allowing them to remain in a single setting during these formative years. Should this approach be adopted, a comprehensive costing exercise would be required to account for the necessary changes, bearing in mind that significant resources already exist within the current system.

Key Points Not Addressed by the Scottish Government

Early School Starting Age

Scotland's children begin formal schooling at an earlier age than most of their international peers. This practice originated during the industrial revolution, when factory owners in England established the school starting age at five, primarily to facilitate women's return to the workforce. Scotland adopted this standard, and it has since become the norm that formal education commences at age five. Presently, only 12% of countries worldwide start school at such an early age, and, except for one, all are former members of the British Empire.

There is no educational advantage to starting school early. Research consistently demonstrates that children who begin formal literacy instruction at age five do not outperform those who start at age seven by the time they are over ten years old. The results even out in the long term. Conversely, an early start to formal education has been linked in numerous studies to social, emotional, and mental health issues as children grow older. Developmental and mental health concerns are increasingly prevalent among Scotland's young people.

Testing

Most schools in Scotland begin formal instruction in literacy and numeracy as soon as children enter Primary 1. This approach is reinforced by the introduction of assessments for P1 pupils, placing pressure on P1 teachers to cover experiences and outcomes relating to literacy and numeracy. This is inconsistent with the philosophy set out in Realising the Ambition. Such early testing is particularly detrimental for children whose developmental foundations are insecure - often those from low-income households. Introducing formal learning too soon disadvantages these children, frequently resulting in feelings of failure and anxiety at a highly formative age. This can sometimes lead to a dislike of school and behavioural issues that currently disrupt classrooms throughout the system.

Child Poverty

Eradicating child poverty is the top priority for the Scottish Government. Nonetheless, a report by Audit Scotland (Improving Outcomes for Young People Through School Education, 2021) found that the poverty-related attainment gap remains significant, and inequalities have worsened due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the report's publication, there has been no sign of recovery in these figures.

At its core, the poverty-related attainment gap is a developmental gap. Five-year-old children from high-income households are, on average, twelve months ahead of their peers from low-income households in spoken language and problem-solving, not academic attainment. These essential skills develop naturally through positive, nurturing interactions with adults and active social play with other children; they cannot be explicitly taught at this stage.

To bridge this gap, children from low-income households require a relationship-centred, play-based environment to foster spoken language and problem-solving skills. They also need several years of exposure to literacy and numeracy-rich environments, similar to those experienced by their high-income peers from birth.

Development Gap

While the Scottish Government invests significant resources in reducing poverty, addressing the attainment gap through the Scottish Attainment Challenge, and enhancing early years provision, measures which are all commendable, it has not paid enough attention to the underlying causes of the attainment gap in the early years. In reality, this is a developmental gap rather than an attainment gap. A developmental perspective prompts reconsideration of what the transition from nursery to primary school should entail. Establishing a kindergarten stage would align better with the priority of reducing the poverty-related attainment gap and would meet the developmental needs of children more effectively than current arrangements.

Petitioners

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