



Includem's response to the National Discussion on Education.

About Includem

We work closely with children, young people, and their families, who are facing difficult challenges in their lives. Our trust-based, inclusive model of support is centred on the needs of each child or young person. We help children, young people and families make positive life choices and empower them to build better lives for themselves and their communities.

Our Mission: To provide the support young people need to make positive changes in their lives, and inspire a more hopeful future for young people, their families, and communities.

Our Vision: A world where every young person is respected, valued, and has the opportunity to actively participate in all aspects of life and society.

Those we support live predominantly in Scotland's most deprived communities and face a range of barriers to engaging fully in formal education (including those relating to poverty, trauma, formal and informal school exclusion and seclusion, digital exclusion, and offending). Those we support, are often prevented from reaching their full academic and social potential. This is due to the persistent poverty-related attainment gap, which forms part of the broader wellbeing gap.

For most of the children, young people, and their families we support, they have been in contact with services for many years, and repeatedly tell us that they feel they have not been listened to. Their resulting distrust of services means their voices are less likely to be reflected in formal consultation processes. They are also more accepting of decisions made by statutory services and as such, often do not recognise when their rights are not being accessed or their needs, particularly their additional support needs, are not being met. Most of children and young people includem supports, meet the criteria for additional support needs under the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, either due to their care experience or experience of trauma and resulting mental health and wellbeing needs.

Includem welcomes both the National Discussion on Education and the approach taken where all voices and experiences will be listened to and acted upon, not just those that represent the experience of the majority. We implore the chairs to prioritise the views of children and young people who are least heard, or more easily ignored, over the louder adult voices (and/or those with a professional vested interest). If we want to deliver change then it needs to be the change children and young people identify will make it better for them.

This response should be read in conjunction with includem's [Schools Experience Report published in 2021](#). Many of the concerns raised by the children and young people then, have been repeated in the conversations we have had with them to form this response. They are still waiting for the change they asked to see happen. We hope that actions from this discussion delivers the change they want and deserve.

As members of Children in Scotland, we fully endorse the calls contained within their [election manifesto briefing on education](#).

NB: The order in which each topic is discussed does not reflect an order of priority by the children and young people consulted, they have been collated to support a logical flow.

Supporting children and young people needs to be more than just about their learning

A Children's Rights Based Approach

Children and young people have a right to education and a right to have their voices heard. These rights are inextricably linked: for children and young people to thrive in their learning, it is essential they are involved in its shaping. Includem are firm defenders of children's rights, recognising that the children, young people and families we support are at a greater risk of not having them realised. Below are some of the rights that we consider should be upheld in education and learning environments.

- Article 28 of the UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) states '*Every child has the right to an education which respects children's dignity and their rights*'.
- Article 29 adds detail to the right to education, supporting the development of the learner's personality, talents, mental and physical abilities, cultural identity, and respect for the natural environment.
- Article 3 directs all adults to make decisions in the best interests of children.
- Article 2 ensures no child is discriminated against based on their circumstances including experiencing poverty or additional learning needs.
- Article 12 enshrines the right of children to have a say in decisions that affect them and for what they say to be given due consideration.
- Article 19 ensures the right to protection from violence and abuse by anyone who looks after them; and
- Article 39 gives them the right to get help to recover from harm.

The children and young people we support report significant breaches to their rights in education. These include:

- Experiencing informal exclusions and seclusion
- Being on reduced timetables for lengthy periods of time and without recourse to review
- Limited access to subject choices due to the poverty and deprivation experienced in the community which their school is located
- The ability to feel safe in the school environment.

While not using the language of the formal articles of the UNCRC, the children and young people we support tell us that the best education and approach to learning would respect and promote all these rights. Children cannot enjoy learning if their needs are not met, or their rights not realised. A fully rights-based approach to Scottish education would be one where wellbeing is fully at the centre, where barriers to education are removed, and where children and young people have a clear and embedded role in influencing decision-making across all levels of learning.

At present, we believe that Scotland has some way to go to realise this. Scottish education needs significant structural and cultural change to ensure that **all** learners' needs are met, and their rights are realised. All children and young people have the right to feel safe, included, and supported to achieve their full potential.

Addressing the impact of poverty

Poverty is recognised as impacting on children's brain development, their school attainment and post school destinations. Poverty increases their risk of experiencing school exclusion¹. It has a detrimental effect on their physical and mental health and wellbeing². Our recent research into the effects of the cost-of-living crisis on the families we support, showed that 66% of families are struggling with child related costs or school costs, and that four out of five struggled with both³. All families that struggled with both school and child-related costs reported worsening mental health.

Over half of families stated that they found it difficult to meet both the costs of school and food at least half the time, meaning many children are going to school hungry.

“More financial support for school. I can't afford school dinner money, or school uniform for the high school uniform, holiday support for clubs etc. It's unfair that as a looked after children they don't have the same opportunity as their pals around the corner for live with their mum and dad.”
“Teachers stigmatizing groups/families due to clothing or being late for good reasons.”

Children and young people also called for free school meals to be more accessible and less stigmatising.

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-exclusion-statistics/>

² [Excluded | EachOther](#)

³ [It is Not a Choice! - Includem](#)

“Having to give your name for a free school lunch in high school. This has resulted in a young person not getting his meal because he is embarrassed.” “Free dinners for everyone so there is no stigma to getting free meals.”

No child or young person should be hungry in school.

We need to understand and intervene in the spaces both in and out of school if we are to ensure all children and young people have an equal opportunity to learn.

Wellbeing and learning

Those we support, tell us that a range of factors including poverty, difficult home situations, the presence of additional support needs, or experience of care, can impact their whole school experience. The focus on addressing the attainment gap is welcomed but we would argue that it is too focused on the academic performance and in-school solutions. In conversations with the children and young people supported by includem to help inform this response, there was a consistent theme around supporting and focusing on their wellbeing and mental health, before supporting their academic performance.

There was recognition that the traditional school environment and learning structures do not work for children and families who have experienced significant trauma and adversity.

“[Young People] who struggle with attachment, it is often not the subject but the relationships that are difficult. In high school on daily basis how many relationships are expected to be formed? If young people find attachment, relationships & connections difficult this is often amplified with changes of teachers, changes of expectations, boundaries, and space during the course of a day.”

Many children called for greater formal and informal support for their mental health within the school setting.

“Having a therapist or counsellor for mental health within school.” “Pupil’s mental health, there should be a dedicated mental health person. And teachers to be more clued up around poor mental health, with less judgement. And it should be talked about more openly and accepted. Not hidden and seen as shameful.” “Making sure there are more staff for Support for Learning/counselling.” “Dedicated mental health support person/therapist and young people would know what they say wouldn’t get passed on (to police/parents etc). Have a mental health room to go to. Have a psychologist who recommend what mental health support is needed in the school. More staff trained to work with young people when their mental health is low.” “A dedicated mental health person not just a teacher ‘helping out’. Raise more awareness around mental health. Teachers should be sent on courses to recognise it more.”

It is interesting to note that they were not asking for school-based counselling but more generic support for their whole wellbeing.

We would ask that there is an equal focus on addressing the wellbeing gap, and for wellbeing measures in both schools and the curriculum to receive a parity of funding and priority by decision makers, school administrators and by those making decisions based on this discussion.

Relationship-based practice

Echoing the findings of our Schools Experience report, many of the children and young people we support, placed a significant emphasis on equal and trusting relationships which respect them, and their rights.

*“How the teachers talk to the pupils, it's feels like they want to be respected but don't show us any.”
“I'd rather teachers didn't shout at us and just spoke to us about issues.”*

Children and young people want relationships with teachers that are supportive, that provide opportunities for teachers, and other school staff, to understand their individual strengths, needs and challenges.

“We need someone to be kind.”

There was particular recognition of the difference in relationships and support provided by pupil support assistants, with many of the children and young people we support calling for this relationship to be mirrored across all school relationships.

“Mainstream teachers, you don't feel respected by them. I prefer pupil support assistants; they spend more one-to-one time with me, and they know me better.”

However, they wanted more support to be provided within the classroom setting so that they do not feel isolated or different from the others in the class.

“The support teachers go to the young people instead of the other way round.”

Children and young people wanted the opportunity to restore relationships within the school and not to be judged on their past behaviour.

“Not judging pupils by their past behaviour - this can affect them not being able to come to classes.” “Be more understanding we all have bad days.” “Make sure the teacher starts a new day as a new slate instead of giving you the cold shoulder.”

In our Schools Experience report we called for restorative practices to be embedded in all schools, and that these should be extended to all school relationships and not just used to resolve conflicts between students.

To make schools the nurturing, welcoming environments sought by children and young people, they suggested making time to support community building, and dedicated time for individual check ins with all students.

“For the first period we spend time together with other members of our family and community, we laugh, colour in and take time to start the day happily.” “Regularly checking in with pupils. Pastoral care check ins”

“You saw the teachers pretty much every day, but your pastoral care teacher you only saw when you’re in trouble. That’s why I didn’t like them. Maybe if they had some sort of system where they maybe go through the register of the year groups or classes and take people out for 15 minutes and see what’s going on every week.”

The school environment

Part of making the school welcoming, and supportive of learning and relationships, the children and young people called for a focus on the physical space.

“Open spaces, aesthetically better for young people.” “Grey walls in the school, is pure heavy depressing!!! More colour, to make it more inviting.”

We heard one story about a young girl aged eleven who physically wet herself on her way home from school as the school toilets felt too unsafe to use, with broken locks and lights and older students using the space to vape. This was not isolated to one school with another young person telling us that

“Our toilet lights don't work most of the time.”

Children and young people reported that they also felt unsafe at school due to bullying and that they wanted more to be done about this.

“Bullies, how they are dealt with. There are no consequences which is sad.” “Do more to stop bullying in school.” “More training to deal with bullying.” “More open communication about bullying.”

Most were not asking for a punitive approach, but one that placed an emphasis on understanding why children and young people were behaving this way and to intervene early.

“Find out why people are being violent” “I don’t feel safe in school, violence is every day. We know the pupils causing it, there should be early intervention.”

They wanted a more physical presence in school social spaces to promote safety and kindness.

“Someone who is in the playground to make everyone feel safe and to be kind to the children.”

Exclusion

Many of the children and young people includem support have experiences of exclusion and have called for the practice of exclusions to end.

“Expulsion - doesn't work. Means that person has to start all over again at new school with people they don't like, and it may make matters worse” “No more exclusions, better mental health support.”

One young person told us about their experience of both exclusion, and in-school seclusion.

“I've been excluded twice this week. I got sent home for not handing my phone to teachers. The other was an internal exclusion. For an internal exclusion you sit in a room all day by yourself. You're supposed to do schoolwork, but no one does. The teachers walk past from time to time but they don't really talk to you. There are different rooms. There's an interview room with a table, a chair and a couch. Some people just fall asleep on the couch. There's only a window on the door. There's a boy that's 11 or 12. He gets internal exclusions all the time. I don't know what for. Normally I walk past and see him in there, but this week it was him walking past seeing me. It's boring. It's isolating. You can be there all day. You can't use the main toilets. You can't talk to people. You don't go out at breaks. You aren't allowed to socialise with anybody. I'd much rather be in class. Being excluded does nothing. They just do it to punish you for your actions, but you can get in trouble for really stupid things.”

Other young people told us about their experience of being informally excluded by either being sent out of class or being sent home for the day.

“Not just excluding me from class when I struggle to manage in a class. It's not fair. I want to learn.” “Don't be sent home for silly things.”

For many of the children and young people we support, they are on part-time timetables for an extended duration of time. They have told us that they have asked repeatedly to be given more time in school and for access to more subjects, but they have not been listened to, with teachers and administrators thinking that they know best what a child needs or can handle.

One young person wanted to talk about their experience of being on a part-time timetable. As a result of their timetable, they stopped attending all together. They explained that this was for a variety of reasons, including not wanting to explain to their friends why they were leaving early or arriving late. They were also embarrassed to use the bus tokens the school gave them to be able to get the bus. Sometimes they would stay home as a result of their mother's worsening mental health, and they wanted to make sure she was okay. After a while the young person started to ask to return to school fulltime but was repeatedly told that they were not ready or could not manage being at school fulltime. They explained to

their includem worker that no one was listening to them. Their includem worker was able to reflect this in a school meeting and the school agreed to them returning to school full-time. Since this agreement, the young person has maintained their school attendance, telling their includem worker that they did it to prove everyone wrong who thought they could not do it.

Worryingly, the children and young people we support, as well as their parents and carers, think that because a decision has been made by the school, it must be legal. This means that they then do not challenge informal exclusions or challenge their children and young people from being 'sent home to cool off,' or against reductions in their timetables. For these students, their right to a full curriculum which promotes their talents and interests, is severely restricted, as they are often being offered only maths and literacy. While includem regularly advocates for the children and young people we support, it can be difficult to influence change. Recently we have supported young people to access legal support through the **My Rights, My Say** service. Through this intervention young people have been successfully supported back into school full-time. This service is currently only available for children aged 12 to 15. Includem would like to see this service, or one like it, to be extended to include younger children and those over 16 to ensure all children access their full right to education.

Scotland's policy on school inclusion and exclusion claims it is rights based and encourages a nurturing approach. However, this is not the experience of the children and young people we support.

"Have a school policy that teachers can't unfairly punish students."

Unfortunately, the policies and guidance do not have statutory powers, and children and young people includem supports continue to experience exclusions from school that are not in line with the guidance. The current guidance on inclusion and exclusion and the proposed guidance on physical restraint and seclusion needs to be given a statutory footing, with a national data set and compulsory reporting, which uses a standardised template. This needs to be established to understand the true extent of school exclusions in all their forms. More needs to be done to ensure that school decision makers, students, parents, and the agencies supporting them, know what children's rights are in relation to accessing the full curriculum on or off a school campus.

Whole family support

Most of the children and young people includem support are also supported by Social Work. They come from homes where they and their families experience adversity and vulnerabilities daily. They are on the edges of care, in conflict with the law or are facing other barriers in their communities. For these children and young people, it was important that schools and teachers understand what is happening outside of school and that they and their parents/carers are given the support they need to be able to attend school and to learn.

“Be more aware of what's going on for young people because they might have stuff going on that's affecting their behaviour.” “Teachers need to be more understanding around students' behaviours. They will stigmatise a student for acting out not knowing why their behaviour is that way.”

Includem’s Model of Support bridges the gap between home and school. One Deputy Head Teacher told us:

“I genuinely feel that the combination of support that you are able to offer to both the young person and their family is filling a void in the system at present that either seems to be for the young person or for the parent but rarely for both. Your combined service has ensured that the school, young person and parent are all working towards a common goal and understand the priorities and strategies to use, this makes for a much more joined up way of working.” “The feedback that I have had from both parents and young people has been so positive, including improving the parent and child’s relationship which in turn has re-energised the parent’s willingness to work with the school to support their child.”

For many of the parents and carers we work with, their experience of school was poor, and this limits their ability and willingness to support their children and young people with their learning (particularly where there may be conflict). Other children, young people and families are reluctant to disclose their caring responsibilities at home for fear of statutory intervention or shame. Other families have unique circumstances such as being asylum seekers or economic migrants where children and adults have limited English. In all of these circumstances, families called for greater support outside of the school to improve their school experience and learning opportunities.

“Help our parents to support us.” “Our parents don't speak English, we have to translate for them and often find this hard. We go to English Classes in school which is helping. Our parents never went to school and don't read or write well so find it hard to support us with schooling.”

“Understand that sometimes we stay home to care for a relative - more support for young carers.”

Family and youth work need to be equal partners in delivery of education and learning.

Uniforms

While some people were supportive of school uniforms, others were not.

“My uniform is all black. I look like an emo. I'd rather wear my own clothes. More comfy and less depressing.” “Uniforms - more freedom in how you dress.” “Uncomfortable uniform – you should be able to wear what you want to an extent.” “Uniform, uncomfortable for certain genders.”

Includem have direct experience of children and young people being asked to go home for not wearing the correct uniform, removing their jacket inside the school, or for refusing to lower their hood. Many of these children are neurodiverse and had been refusing to attend

school. Through the skill and perseverance of the includem workers they were supported to return to school, only to be turned away for not adhering to the school uniform policy. Other children and young people cannot afford the school uniform, and this creates a significant barrier to them attending school or again they are sent home for not wearing the correct uniform. *“Badged uniforms are too expensive, just choose a colour.”* More needs to be done to ensure that uniform policies and how they are enforced, do not get in the way of children and young people receiving the education they have a right to.

Additional support for learning and learning in different ways

Additional support needs can arise, in the short or long term, from a variety of circumstances including the learning environment, family circumstances, health or disability needs or social and emotional factors. The children and young people includem support often experience a combination of these factors which make the traditional learning environment difficult for them. Many of these children reported finding remote learning during covid restrictions worked better for them. Others identified ways in which teaching style and school structures needed to change to be able to meet their needs. This includes making adjustments for their learning styles, creating flexible learning, schooling, establishing different ways to assess and recognise achievements, and supporting a greater choice and availability of subjects and pathways.

Learning Styles

Echoing the findings of our *Schools Experience* report, the children and young people identified that they wanted a school and education system that made adjustments to support their learning styles.

“Schools need to adapt to pupils’ style of learning. Classes could be broken down to different learning styles.”

They wanted the opportunity to explore and use their individual strengths in non-traditional ways, including mentoring younger children.

“More recognition of individual children’s personal qualities. In a recent meeting the teacher shared the views of two siblings who are receiving additional support to enhance their learning. The children are gaining opportunities to help younger children based on their strengths.”

Some students suggested mixed age classes rather than mixed abilities in order to support children learning at similar levels or paces.

“Realise young people learn at different speeds.” “Awareness that people learn at different speeds and in different ways.”

Children and young people felt that they needed more individual time with teachers for their strengths and needs to be recognised and understood, and to allow for individual plans to be put in place.

“Teachers should care more about each one’s learning.”

They recognised that the current staffing levels and breadth of the curriculum to be covered within the school year made this difficult to achieve.

Other children wanted the style of teaching to change to be more mindful of their wellbeing and confidence.

“Teachers shouting you up for questions but putting pressure on you if you do not know the answer - maybe check understanding privately so as not to feel put on spot or embarrassed.”

They suggested a range of tasks and activities in each lesson or subject to allow everyone to learn the same topic but in different ways and at different paces.

“Understanding from teachers if extra time needed to complete tasks.”

Flexible learning/schooling

For those who find a traditional school environment difficult, they wanted a greater opportunity to learn flexibly and in different ways. These children and young people have previously avoided school through poor attendance or truancy or have been moved out of mainstream schools to alternative placements with a restricted curriculum. They asked for the learning from Covid-19 restrictions and the school closures to not be lost, and methods developed, to continue flexible and remote learning for those who have found that this worked best for them.

“More support for people who can't learn in a classroom.” “Has to be more hands on and fun - make high school more like primary.” “Be more flexible with learning and where it takes place - in school, at home or elsewhere.”

Assessment and achievement

The children and young people asked for more feedback on a regular basis to know if they are doing well, and where they need to focus their attention. This needs to be given individually and privately.

“Feedback from teachers- verbal communication saying if were doing well.”

The children and young people includem support experience many barriers and challenges to their learning, including family conflict, poverty and hunger, and are living in crowded and poor housing conditions. This means that their school performance can vary significantly from one day to the next. For them, it is important that assessments of their learning and attainment happen throughout the year, rather than single exams at the end.

“Grades should be measured throughout the year, not with single exams at the end. Once a week/month.”

Even with continuous assessment, children and young people wanted informal tracking.

“More frequent tracking in class to see how we are doing rather than just waiting for a test.”

It is however, important to note that there was less emphasis from children and young people on assessment and achievement than other topics. This could reflect their expectations and aspirations in terms of attainment and success.

Curriculum and subject choice

The children and young people includem support previously reported that they feel they have access to fewer subjects due to attending schools in areas of deprivation. They reported that the way school timetables are structured (with the use of columns), further limits their choice and variety. They want to see this change and given greater access to a range of subjects. This could perhaps be done by pooling resources with other schools, or through using remote learning to connect students across geographical areas.

“The young person was specific in stating 'technology' over computers as they feel that schools should be doing more to adapt to technology that is now commonplace but really enjoy the classes they do that involve computers.” “Making sure there is a fair selection of subjects for pupils.” “More activities and interesting courses”

Young people want to be offered learning opportunities beyond the traditional subjects which focus more on preparing them for life and for adulthood. Some wanted this instead of traditional subjects, others wanted it to complement these subjects and to provide breathing space.

“Having more life skills type learning, less pressure for those that can't do the science, maths and science subjects so well - may take pressure off learning” “I'd quite like classes like that to prepare me for being an adult.”

This would be particularly valuable for those growing up away from a family environment or where their own parents have not developed these skills due to their own childhood experiences. This fits with having a rights-based approach to education which develops the whole child, including talents and interests.

The children and young people includem support are at increased risk of leaving school early and without qualifications. Many stop attending school before they reach an age where alternative education (such as college courses) is available. There are children and young people who desire an alternative to traditional academic achievements, and further, and continuing education. They want more options for vocational learning within school and in alternative settings.

“Different education earlier access to apprenticeships.”

A well-resourced and supported system

Children and young people recognise that the changes they are seeking will not come without a cost. They want schools and other places of learning to be appropriately resourced and supported.

“Schools need more money. Teachers should be paid. The future of the country depends on teachers - they're teaching the future generation.” “Give schools more money for more teachers and support teachers.”

At includem we call for children’s rights and wellbeing budgeting to be at the centre of the decision-making process. That decisions are made regarding how the learning opportunities and the environment can best support all children and young people, not just for those who traditional school environments work and bring success.

We want to leave you with some of the things children and young people thought would happen if we designed education based on their views and that respected, valued and included everyone.

“I think more people would go to school.” “Better grades all round.” “Happy young people.” “Education would be flying.” “You would see a lot more pupils succeeding, there wouldn’t be a 2-tier education system.”