

West Lothian high schools outperform others across Scotland

Scottish school exam league tables have been criticised for being skewed by a “massive industry of private tutors.”

Recent results showed West Lothian had outperformed other local authorities in high schools' exams these years.

But Heather Hughes from the Education Institute of Scotland, told councillors teachers faced a crippling workload and league tables did nothing to help the poorest close the gap with families who had more.

“These people in the top deciles in Linlithgow [Academy] and James Young [High School], they have private tutors we cannot compare like for like. It's not fair and that's why we need education reform.”

The best performing schools are in the wealthiest areas, with schools serving poorer catchment areas performing less well. The gap is closing though between rich and poor, Q5 and Q1 on the national index of deprivation.

Mrs Hughes was speaking at a meeting of the Education Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel which had heard of across-the-board improvements in exam results in fourth, fifth and sixth years, where pupil performance had outstripped that of virtual comparator schools- those from areas across the country with a similar societal make-up.

A report to the committee by Siobhan McGarty Head of Education (Secondary) detailed key successes: –

- More West Lothian S4 students are sitting and passing at least five National 5 exams than they were in 2018/19, and sits above the virtual comparator and national level.
- In S4 and S5, West Lothian pupils are outperforming the virtual comparator in literacy and numeracy at Level 4 and Level 5 .
- At S4, West Lothian pupils are achieving above the level of the virtual comparator and the national average at SCQF Level 5.
- At S5, West Lothian pupils are achieving above the level of the virtual comparator and the national average at SCQF Level 3, SCQF Level 4 and SCQF Level 5
- At S5, West Lothian pupils are achieving significantly above the level of the virtual comparator and the national average at SCQF Level 6.
- At S6 stage West Lothian pupils are leaving with more qualifications than the virtual comparators and national average at SCQF Level 6.
- The attainment gap in average total tariff points between Q1(poorest) and Q5 (richest) is less than the national average in S5.

Mrs Highes told the meeting: "As the secondary EIS rep I'm sure you would all join me congratulating everybody in schools because West Lothian has continued to outperform all of its virtual comparators.

"My colleagues would not be happy if I was to sit here and wasn't to say to you that comes at a cost.

"Our workload is crippling. The average teacher in Scotland works more than 11 hours extra every single week. That cannot go on because that interferes with their family life.

"If we were to take that 11 hours and multiply it by the number of teachers in Scotland, we're actually saving the Scottish Government from employing an extra 2,200 teachers. So teachers in West Lothian give their all.

She added: "Why do they have these league tables? What are they actually useful for, because anyone who is teaching is not interested. We move from school to school and we do the same from one school to another.

"League tables do not take into account individuals circumstance and they don't tackle in the massive industry of private tutors. These people in the top deciles in Linlithgow and James Young they have tutors they have private tutors we cannot compare like for like.

"It's not fair and that's why we need education reform."

She continued: "We need more teachers, the teachers that were promised to us.

"We should absolutely celebrate this success but please start thinking about all the things that young people achieve that are not reflected in these tables that you are looking at. It is only exams that you are seeing and that is not what education is about."

She said education should be about preparing people for life,

not just giving them bits of paper, suggesting the best schools had the happiest pupils.

Depute Provost, Conservative councillor Peter Heggie congratulated schools and pupils for their success but warned that the success was set against the backdrop of continual cuts to the budget by the Scottish Government.

SNP depute group leader Pauline Stafford showed that Scottish Government policy had been successful in closing the attainment gap between the richest and poorest across the country.

Chairing the meeting Independent Councillor Andrew McGuire said: "I find myself agreeing with what Heather Hughes has said. The education profession has been let down by continued promises of reform which never quite materialise and at the same time ever more is placed upon the profession in terms of expectation and that does lead to breaking point with more teachers going off with stress."

He said that the reality of teaching was that it was a vocation for many, but the EIS had done a commendable job in highlighting the growing pressures on staff.

He added: "Schools should be far more than exam factories and I'm confident that our schools are far more than that. I think we would all wish to extend our thanks to hard working staff in schools and hard working pupils in the last year."

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter