

Unions and parents call for more teachers in Scotland's nurseries ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Local authorities have been accused of undermining standards in nurseries by employing fewer teachers and more nursery nurses.

Parents, headteachers and teachers have joined forces to highlight the issue.

They say in the six years to 2011 the number of teachers in nurseries has fallen by 12%, to 1,500.

Cosla, the umbrella body representing Scottish councils, said a mix of skills and qualifications was good for children.

In a written statement to MSPs on the education committee, teaching unions and the Scottish Parent Teacher Council (SPTC) suggested local authorities were taking advantage of the Scottish government's loosely worded policy on nursery education.

The submission stated: "Despite a commitment by the Scottish government to 'access to a nursery teacher for every nursery age child' and considerable evidence demonstrating the long-term impact of trained teachers in pre-primary settings, many local authorities are diluting or dismantling their nursery provision."

In recent years local authorities have started offering longer and more flexible hours in response to demand from parents who suggested the standard two and a half hours each morning or afternoon was disappointing or difficult to work around.

Nursery nurses who work more flexible hours, and are on lower salaries than teachers, have been a key part of the strategy.

The nurses now receive more in-depth training in education and care - up to degree level in some cases.

In recognition of that they usually have new official job titles such as child development officers or early years officers.

Figures published in 2009 indicated substantial numbers of nurseries have no qualified teachers on the permanent staff but almost all have some input from a teacher.

The submission to Holyrood from parents' leaders and the AHDS, SSTA, SPTA, NASUWT and ATL education unions indicated children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds made more progress with trained teachers.

Calling for a reverse in the trend of employing fewer teachers, the statement pointed to a 2007 report by HM Inspectorate of Education which concluded: "HMIE evidence found that overall the quality of children's experiences was of a higher standard in nursery schools and nursery classes where traditionally teachers were employed.

"Teachers using their acquired knowledge of learners, learning, teaching and assessment were most able to apply this expertise to ensure effective early education practice."

'Second best'

Cosla said it is committed to its entire children's services workforce.

A spokesman added: "We believe that a mixed workforce provides the flexibility and appropriate range of skills and experience to provide Scotland's children with the best start in life."

Children's Minister Aileen Campbell said the Scottish government is committed to ensuring all children receive access to a pre-school teacher.

She added: "Significant progress has been made in recent years. The number of children in nursery with access to a teacher has increased from 66% to 75% in 2011 during the past three years. "

The union, Unison, which represents many early years workers rejected any suggestion that they are "second best".

Carol Ball, chair of Unison's education issues group, said: "Child development officers are fully-qualified, early years professionals - with equivalent qualifications and duties to nursery teachers - and deliver high quality early years education and childcare.

"The Scottish Parliament's education committee must realise that early years education is delivered by a wide range of highly-trained professionals, not just nursery teachers, and must work with all staff involved to provide children with the best start in life."

Convener Stewart Maxwell MSP said: "The committee held a one off-evidence session on early years last week, one of a series of meetings looking at key issues for children across Scotland.

"The committee will take evidence from the cabinet secretary for education and lifelong learning on all of these issues before the summer."

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Region: Europe ^[2]

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