

# High Dunoon:

**How one Scottish school  
empowered its staff and pupils,  
and transformed a community**

Gillian Hunt

## About Reform Scotland

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## Gillian Hunt

Gillian Hunt is an educational consultant collaborating with third sector organisations, businesses and national organisations to support young people towards successful futures. Her work has involved discussion, research and networking with organisations and individuals across Scotland. She is known for her skills and expertise in interacting with others, exchanging information and connecting people and organisations.

Gillian has been an educator for more than 30 years and initially as a primary teacher, holding several leadership roles in schools before moving into the City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) as Leadership and Management Development Officer. Gillian was the first Academic Co-ordinator of the Chartered Teacher Programme at the University of Edinburgh, and held that role for two years before returning to the Council as Learning and Development Manager. Gillian served as a panel member on the Edinburgh Children's Panel for five years and led the Scottish Professional Learning Network from 2014 to 2016.

Gillian is the chair of the board of Scrان Academy and a board trustee of the Children's Parliament. She was one of the leading committee members of Scottish Educational Leadership Management and Administration Society (SELMAS) for more than 10 years.

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## Foreword

There is much focus, in the media and elsewhere, on what is wrong with Scottish education. That is to be expected and is important: you can only fix problems when you acknowledge they exist. But it's also important to talk about the success stories – those projects from which others can learn and benefit.

Dunoon Grammar School (DGS) seems to be a good example of this. Gillian Hunt's conversations with the school community – and in a Dunoon context the word "community" is widely cast, as you will see – draw out an exemplary environment for young people to learn, grow, find future opportunities, and contribute their own ideas. Teachers are encouraged to think for themselves, and take an "outward looking" approach to their job. External partners in the public, third and private sectors have become part of the DGS family.

At the heart of all this is head teacher David Mitchell, who emerges from this report as a local hero. A former DGS pupil himself, he has returned to the school and driven a revolution in culture and environment, one that has allowed staff and pupils to flower.

Empowered heads and schools like Dunoon are exactly what Scottish education needs if the problems within our system are to be replaced with solutions.

**Chris Deerin**  
**Director**  
**Reform Scotland**

# Introduction

I fell into being a teacher, and found that I loved it. My career began almost 35 years ago, as a primary school teacher. I then moved into school leadership, then senior local authority roles in leadership, learning and development, with two years as a senior lecturer in higher education.

Since leaving my local authority role seven years ago I have worked with third sector and national organisations as a freelance education consultant, and am a trustee of two children's and young people's charities. This has enabled me to get back to my roots, to the reason I went into education in the first place: to help make a difference to children and young people.

In that time, working with individuals and organisations across Scotland, it has become increasingly clear to me that our education system is struggling to meet the needs of all children and young people, in the main due to diminishing resources. Our system cannot do it alone, we need to reach out and get help from others, but we don't seem to be very good at doing this.

I believe that to affect change we must raise awareness of issues or problems, pilot and evaluate, and propose and take action. To raise awareness I had around 30 conversations with individuals from a variety of third, public and private sector organisations to produce a paper entitled: An Ecosystem: what we need for effective collaboration in Scotland. In this I sought to examine co-operation between the third and other sectors, to explore barriers to collaboration and highlight some positive and effective examples. I concluded the paper with four recommendations: set up an organisation to map third sector collaboration; require schools to nominate a staff member to be responsible for third sector relationships; simplify funding and allow it to follow the individual; and develop how sectors learn with and from each other, and apply that learning.

Through those conversations I discovered pilots or prototypes we could learn from, which would lead to proposals and actions. The initial paper brought forth a significant response which led to the publication of a reaction paper 'Making effective collaboration in Scotland a reality'.

One of those prototypes: a school already operating as an ecosystem, and one exemplifying the age-old phrase, “taking a village to raise a child” is Dunoon Grammar School (DGS). I discovered DGS on an STV news item in October 2022 when they won the T4 Education World’s Best School Prize for Community Collaboration. I arranged a chat with Head Teacher, David Mitchell, and a visit followed, so that I could see Dunoon Grammar for myself. A second visit to have conversations with those in the Dunoon Grammar community followed.



Dunoon Grammar School has created its own ecosystem within the current education system. The focus is on young people and the desire by all in the community to be part of enabling them to thrive. But it's also about Dunoon itself thriving and one cannot be done without the other, so there is a recognition that everyone is in it together. There is an incredible feeling of belonging. It's truly a community, a family.

The information included in the following sections are derived from interviews with those in the Dunoon Grammar School community and from my own reflections:

1. A first visit to Dunoon Grammar School
2. Dunoon Grammar, an ecosystem
3. Some of the collaborations
4. Dunoon Grammar: in their own words
5. Conclusion and advice from the Dunoon Grammar community

This paper aims to show what we can learn from this prototype to create ecosystems across Scotland.

## A first visit to Dunoon Grammar School

On a bright, chilly January day I headed “doon the watter” to Dunoon Grammar School. I spent a morning there, meeting staff and pupils and was completely blown away by what I saw, and felt. Dunoon Grammar has an amazing atmosphere which you feel as soon as you go through the school gates. You feel welcome, drawn into this community within a community. It is a calm, purposeful place which seems to have no barriers, where you are greeted with smiles, chat and even a fist bump or two.

There is an interesting flow to the place, from the way students enter the building, how they move within it, the positive and amazingly quiet buzz felt in the hall where all students go for morning break and lunch, to the movement in and out of the various centres within the school: the Learning Hub where all students can access learning support; the Learning Centre for students with severe and complex needs; the Gaelic School; the Well-being Centre offering a soft start to the day for students who need it; and the Snug where students who display challenging behaviour are able to receive the support they need. None of this movement jars, there seems to be no harsh or difficult transitions between any of the parts of the school, all feel organically connected.



In brief conversations with staff I got the impression that they have autonomy to act in the best interests of their young people, and that includes seeking out their own collaborations and partnerships beyond the school. David Mitchell, the head teacher, described the many partnerships and collaborations with those in their community, and with organisations around the country - he seems to be chief collaborator. As he described all of this partnership work I asked if he still saw himself as the head teacher. He thought for a moment and said he saw himself as a facilitator.

And what about David himself? He is a former pupil, having left Dunoon Grammar in 1993 to train as a Design and Technology Teacher. He started his teaching career at Oban High School and secured his first headship at Castle Douglas School in Dumfries and Galloway in 2010. He returned to Argyll and Bute in 2013 as HT of Dunoon, which he calls “*my dream job*”. David’s goal then, and now, was to make DGS a centre of excellence, in terms of attainment, wellbeing, achievement, community and much more. He says, “*I want the young people in our school to have the best experience they can with as many opportunities open to them.*”

I believe that the school already addresses three of the recommendations in my initial paper: first, amazing partnerships with others in their community; second, everyone in the school seems to be outward-looking; and third, it’s somewhere we can learn from. So at the end of my visit I asked David if I could tell Dunoon Grammar’s story, to show others that a school

can already work as an ecosystem and do so within existing constraints. David, of course, said yes.

Reflecting on the visit I began to wonder if what I had seen was actually the reality. Was it a school where staff were able to act with autonomy? And what about community engagement? How did partners feel? And what were the views of students and parents?

If I was going to tell the Dunoon Grammar story it had to involve those in that community. Ahead of my second visit in March 2023, I sent a set of questions/prompts for consideration, asking people to describe Dunoon Grammar, to say how they thought it might differ from other schools, to tell me why they believed they won the T4 prize, what they got from being part of this community and finally to provide advice to others.

## **Dunoon Grammar, an ecosystem**

On my second visit I interviewed representatives from the DGS community: six members of school staff, five parents, two students and nine partners. Of the adults I interviewed, five were also former pupils of Dunoon Grammar, and three of the five parents were also staff members.

Definitions of an ecosystem usually include words and phrases such as networks, interaction, working together, inter-relation and community. In my observations of Dunoon Grammar and from any conversations I have had with those in the community I can conclude that it is indeed an ecosystem: a community of interacting organisms (well, people) and their environment. The school sits at the heart of this environment and its purpose is clear - to provide everything and anything that students need to thrive and be successful. And a huge part of this is making sure that this environment and wider community can thrive and be successful too.

David said that when he started at DGS there were few employment opportunities in Dunoon so most of the students left the town when they left school. He concluded that the school had to help the town and vice versa, and so this amazing ecosystem began to grow.

Dunoon has many collaborators (a full list can be found in Appendix 1). They are local and national organisations, large and small, and from public, private and third sectors.



## Some of the collaborations

One collaboration which exemplifies the success of this prototype is the **Dunoon Project**, which is a public, private and community venture. The project aims to attract visitors, create employment and boost the wider economy. Their vision is to make Dunoon a first-choice destination for outdoor adventure and they seek to do this by installing a cable car from the sea to Kilbride Hill with a cafe at the top, a kind of zip-wire as a means of returning to the waterfront, and a world-class mountain bike trail. The project has two advisory boards: one senior, one junior. The junior board comprises DGS students of all ages. Those in primary schools know that when they get to DGS they too can join the board, so the project grows with the young people. Brendon Wallace, one of the Directors, sees the importance of collaboration with the school and recognises that young people bring a different viewpoint. Where some in the community may have concerns about how busy the town might become, the young people know it will bring them jobs. Brendon is clear that he wants to see Dunoon flourish again and states that the Dunoon Project will support this. He believes that Dunoon has so much to offer and that it is the school's job to promote this. He wants to see young people stay in the town and increase its population. (For plans see Appendix 2)

One of the new projects at Dunoon Grammar which demonstrates the faith and support of **Argyll and Bute Council** is the acquisition of an old toy library. This empty building, owned by the local authority, sat just outside the school. David saw this as an opportunity - if this building and its overgrown garden was within the school's footprint then it could become a **new community building and garden**. The community could access adult learning classes, such as Spanish, perhaps tutored by DGS students; the garden could become a multigenerational endeavour; and if any student had to be excluded from classes (as happens seldom, but is at times necessary) then they would no longer need to be excluded from school as they could be accommodated and supported here. Argyll and Bute Council recognises the positive impact Dunoon Grammar has on its community, has faith and belief in David, but also importantly "has his back" – it moved the toy library within the school footprint.

The **Youth and Philanthropy Initiative (YPI)** was introduced by the Wood Foundation in 2008 and works with young people to take responsibility for charitable giving in their own communities. Schools receive a grant for £3,000 and through research, teamwork and competition direct that grant to a local charity. Alex Reid and Lynn Raynal from YPI describe Dunoon Grammar as an inclusive school who are genuinely and authentically collaborative. They find that DGS provide support at all levels (students, staff and the senior leadership team). Interestingly, they said that although the leadership in the school is one of its strengths, the culture is well-embedded and not reliant on one champion. They finished our conversation by saying that Dunoon make it (collaboration) simpler.





## Grab a bargain at our 2023 10x Challenge Pop-up Mall

Join our S2 learners as they host a very special shopping experience in our school. For the past few weeks our young people have been taking part in the 10x Challenge - a UK wide initiative where young people receive £10 each and are tasked with setting up a business enterprise.

Our S2 learners will be selling their products/services at a one off shopping spectacular in the school forum on Friday, 24 March 2023. The event will be open to members of the public from 2 pm to 2.30 pm.

We hope you can join us, we wouldn't want you missing out on some unique and fantastic deals!



Julie Degnan, Project Manager, **Scotland's Enterprising Schools**, has worked with the school for a number of years and nominated them for a TES Award in 2019, which they won. She recognises "*the tremendous effort they put into building and maintaining partnerships to benefit not only their learners but the local community too. They also ensure that all collaborations are mutually beneficial... we feel that we are real friends of the school.*"

The **University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI)** Schools Link Manager, Elaine Munro, works closely with DGS. She says that, "(the school is) *focused on every individual student*". She sees UHI as part of the educational pipeline in the community and feels part of that community. She sees how DGS raises the visibility of local jobs and has close links to local economic drivers. I asked if Dunoon Grammar differed from other schools and she simply said, "*they really get it*".

Parent Fiona Campbell (also a member of staff and a former pupil) told me how Dunoon Grammar fits her son Barry. **Fourth-year student Barry is a talented footballer** and plays for Morton FC under 18s. He has secured a football scholarship in America which he will take up when he reaches the age of 17 years and 10 months. The school has ensured that Barry has been able to develop this talent by releasing him for weekly work experience at the club and ensuring that he is able to access flexible teaching and support in the Hub for the subjects he misses at those times. He also has the opportunity to do more PE. Fiona says that all teachers support this to happen and that Barry appreciates this and works hard. Fiona says that without the school fitting the needs of her child he would not have had the chance to be part of Morton FC, nor achieved the US scholarship. She also believes that Barry's experience will now be a legacy for students who follow him.

## Dunoon Grammar: in their own words

### Describing Dunoon Grammar School

Herald journalist, Kevin McKenna, visited Dunoon Grammar and published an article on 4 November 2022, and in it said, *"it looks, and feels a lot like love"*. Paul Gallanagh, Principal Teacher of Business and Computing used this quote to open his conversation with me.

In interviews, three words came up time and again: welcoming, friendly and family. Dunoon Grammar was described as a place where people look out for each other, where people give you the time you need, that those in it, and connected to it, are family and that the young people are our own children. But they also said that it is ambitious and exciting, with something new always around the corner.

The focus in Dunoon Grammar is on relationships. The students are at the centre and it's about making things happen for them. Everyone involved is proactive in seeking help for students and people see opportunities, not barriers. A willingness to learn with and from each other is clear.

*"People look out for each other"* - Joanne Tarrant, school nurse

*"It's more than the classroom and I wanted that for my children"* - Fiona Campbell, parent, ASN assistant, and former pupil.

*"There's always someone to talk to and you don't feel judged"* - Katy, S6 student

*"Forward-thinking, willing to try new things, happy to embrace the outside and we feel like friends"* - Jodie Campbell, **Apps for Good**

*"Heart and soul, embedded in the community"* - Brendon Wallace, Dunoon Project

### Is it different from other schools?

*"All staff support students"* - Katy and Meredith, S6 students

*"Partners certainly indicate this (that we are different). We have always been big on developing the creative capacity of our young people and skills for future learning, life and work. I think we have a Head Teacher who loves a punt and trusts staff to break new ground - support and forgiving when things don't go to plan."* - Paul Gallanagh, Principal Teacher of Business and Computing

*"Gives permission to teachers, makes them feel better about their jobs"* - Julie Degnan, [Scotland's Enterprising Schools](#)

*"Dunoon Grammar has the ingredients for success - want to listen and learn, make time, are not insular, open and willing to collaborate, get buy-in and genuine collaboration...And they are authentic, empowering and warm"* - Alex Reid, [YPI, Wood Foundation](#)

*"Everybody is approachable and the Head Teacher always gives people time"* - Scott McKinnon, DYW Regional Lead and former pupil, and Pam McNaughton, DYW Admin and Finance Assistant and former parent. (**Argyll and Bute Developing the Young Workforce**)

*"David (Head Teacher) is a big influence, what's there has been embedded by him"* - Willie Quinn, Police Scotland

*"It's a really good school with a phenomenal Head Teacher. Children are his focus and you believe that"* - Brendon Wallace, Dunoon Project

### **Why do you think Dunoon won the T4 Prize?**

David's mission was to make the school the heart of the community. During the interviews I found consensus that the school embodies what community is, that it looks outward. The community knows the school and the school its community. The focus, though, is on the young people, with a strong feeling of care and the desire to go above and beyond for them.

*"The number one priority is young people"* - Katy and Meredith, S6 students

*"We recognise our young people are not just the future, but the here and now - able and willing to make a positive difference to our communities. We also work closely with our communities to facilitate rich, active experiential learning within real and relevant contexts - this ensures deeper learning"* (See Barry's Story) - Paul Gallanagh, Principal Teacher Business and Computing

*"The school has a big presence in the town...lots of people grew up here, have love for the school, others catch it"* - Joanne Tarrant, school nurse

*"It's not one thing but David is the core, a pillar of the community, he's always surrounded by people when he's in the community, he is the hub"* - Derek Darkins, Principal Teacher, Humanities

*"(Dunoon Grammar) is focused on every individual student"* - Elaine Munro, Schools Link Manager, [UHI, Argyll](#)

*"Open and welcoming and looking to the future for children now"* - Willie Quinn, Police Scotland (talking about his own son who is six and will go to DGS in six years' time)

### **What do you get out of it? What are the excitements and challenges?**

Again overwhelmingly, people said they felt part of the community and actually part of a family. There was a strong sense of a pipeline for young people with participants playing a part in making this happen. Staff particularly liked the opportunity of working "outside the box" and having creative licence. There was a sense of achievement that others could learn from DGS and it was great to work with other organisations, and to be recognised. In terms of the wider Dunoon Project, all have an impact upon it and it upon them. Brendon Wallace

of the Dunoon Project is clear that the young people will grow with the project. It has welcomed their enthusiasm, suggestions and alternate viewpoints.

Scott, Regional Lead for DYW, noted that there is a massive time resource to create community collaboration and that he doesn't know how David does it. He said, *"Our job is easier because of how DGS works."*

*"DGS have offered us many opportunities to share our work with wider audiences"* - Julie Degan, Scotland's Enterprising Schools

*"We feel part of Dunoon Grammar School. You never leave DGS feeling that education is difficult"* - Lynn Raynal, YPI Wood Foundation

*"I feel proud. Part of the team. Your job title isn't a thing - all are respected. Even though there is a hierarchy, there's not"* - Julie Clark, Additional Support Assistant

*"We're making a difference for the young people in Dunoon and getting the best outcomes for them"* - Elaine Munro, Schools Link Manager, UHI Argyll

*"Dunoon Grammar are strong ambassadors for Apps for Good"* - Jodie Campbell, Apps for Good

*"The school is responsive to students (citing the school's 'What we did from what you said')"*  
- Katy and Meredith, S6 students

## Conclusion and advice from the Dunoon Grammar community

In terms of the village raising the child, that the whole of DGS is greater than the sum of its parts and what it gets from collaboration, Paul Gallanagh sums this up by saying, *"Our partners help us move forward – to rejuvenate our curricular offer and learning experiences for our young people. Partners that offer learning opportunities that fit the values of your school are worth their weight in gold. They help raise ambitions and open avenues to quality learning. Young people value this way of learning and won't allow you to go back to your old less-productive ways once you facilitate such learning. Start with the tried and tested national organisations that have a proven track record of supporting schools - Scotland's Enterprising Schools, Apps for Good, YPI, Tenner, Young Enterprise, Digital Schoolhouse, etc. Then look local - forge and nurture relationships for mutual benefit, across the curriculum. Reach out with ideas - open channels of communication. Involve in curricular offer and course planning. Embed in strategic and tactical plans - to ensure it's not a bolt on - but a central means of delivering fulfilling and effective learning experience and outcomes."*

David Mitchell wants to continue to develop Dunoon Grammar School as a school at the heart of the community, to build on the positive links they have made and to make the school the best it can be. He recognises that education can be difficult at times and says, *"the current financial situation makes it even harder to provide a wide range of opportunities for young people. In Dunoon Grammar School we are lucky that our partners, community and parents/carers all want to join together to ensure our young people's needs are met. Our partners provide great opportunities that allow our young people to connect with professionals in areas they are interested in. It is definitely the way education needs to move. We need to be open to much more collaboration."*

David and his leadership feature throughout this paper, and did in all the conversations I had. People said he was phenomenal, a pillar of the community, someone who always has time for others. I too have experienced this in all of my dealings with David, and indeed with all at Dunoon Grammar. I truly believe that all staff have permission to be outward-looking, are encouraged to use their local knowledge and to act upon it, and they know that David has their backs. This filters down throughout the organisation and David himself acknowledges this from those above him in the local authority. Everyone is approachable and every door is always open. This could lead to a concern that if David left, everything would change. However, as one partner said, the culture at Dunoon Grammar is embedded and not reliant on one champion so this is not a worry.

The final question I asked all interviewees was what advice they would give to other schools:

- Encourage school leaders to be open to growing the community, that it does not sit with one department or in one person's remit
- Give staff permission to be outward looking, and outward acting
- Encourage staff to "get out there"
- Don't talk about barriers, talk about opportunities
- Take time to build relationships with organisations
- Put yourself in the young person's shoes, listen to students and don't put them in a box
- Get parents involved and get as many outside agencies in as you can
- Focus on mutually beneficial partnerships and plan for sustained relationships
- Meet young people where they are and have high but not overpowering aspirations
- Have an open door, a can-do approach, say "let's try", perseverance, and stick with it



- Learn from experience
- Be at the heart of your community
- You've got to love what you do, the people you are with...and back it up with actions

Dunoon Grammar embodies what community means. The school is at the heart of the community and people recognise that. They are doing this without additional resources or any special measures. Put simply, it's their way of being. The DGS ecosystem is a model or prototype we can learn from - we just have to have the desire to do it.

And my final reflections? If I was still a teacher, this is where I would want to work. If a parent, this would be where I'd want my children to go to school.

1. **Apps for Good** - an opportunity for our young people to engage in Tech innovation and design Apps
2. **Architeco** - architect in Dunoon providing work experience opportunities and inputs in school
3. **Argyll and Bute Council** - Work experience provider and supporter of everything we do
4. **Argyll Holidays** - Work experience provider
5. **BC Technologies** - Local business that supports the school with work experience - 90% of their workforce is former pupils.
6. **Benmore Gardens** - Botanical garden in Dunoon which provides apprentice opportunities to our young people
7. **Browns of Strone** - Building and civil engineering contractor is a work experience provider
8. **Cowal Elected members** - local elected members who support the school
9. **Cowal Highland Gathering** - annual festival for Highland dancing and piping
10. **Developing the Young Workforce, Argyll and Bute** - local group developing skills for learning life and work
11. **Dunoon Burgh Hall** - Arts venue in Dunoon
12. **Dunoon Community Council**
13. **Dunoon Community Shed** - A charity aiming to improve the health, well-being and social needs of older men. Intergenerational work with members of the community. Practical work.
14. **Dunoon Film Festival** - annual event that takes place in Dunoon
15. **Dunoon Project** - local business partners who have set up a company to develop Dunoon as an adventure capital of Scotland
16. **Dunoon School Hostel** - Accommodation for young people attending Dunoon Grammar School
17. **Help Project** - Local charity established to support young people move on from school
18. **McNee's Construction** - work experience provider
19. **Police Scotland** - Youth engagement officer based in the school
20. **Scotland's Enterprising Schools**
21. **Skills Development Scotland** - support our young people move onto a positive destination
22. **Stewart's Garage** - Work experience provider
23. **Wood Foundation** - Facilitator of the YPI programme where our young people investigate social issues in our local area
24. **Young Enterprise Scotland**
25. **11 associated local primary schools** - work experience providers and partners in developing curricular pathways for young people





The Dunoon Project  
Appendix 2

Plans for the Dunoon Project



Image from Twitter @DunoonProject



