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Thank you for your letter dated 13 March 2018, updating me on the latest progress of the STEP programme in respect of the increasing number of schools which are now using it. I was present to make the keynote speech at the Pupil Equity Funding Event in Kilmarnock on 26 February, where Dalmilling Primary School presented their experience of the STEP programme.

Scottish Ministers recognise that we have an attainment gap in our schools, between our most well-off and least well-off pupils, and we are determined to see that gap close. This is why we have committed £750 million through the Scottish Attainment Challenge, over the course of this Parliamentary session, to help close the poverty-related attainment gap. This funding includes £120 million of Pupil Equity Funding in both the 2017-18 and 2018-19 financial years, which has extended the reach of the Scottish Attainment Challenge to every local authority in Scotland.

In respect of ways in which Pupil Equity Funding money can be spent to tackle the attainment gap, in my reply to [Redacted - s.38(1)(b)] of 21 December 2017 I stated that I am aware there are currently a wide range of physical activity and literacy programmes being promoted to schools which can help to address the attainment gap. I fully agree that physical activity improves the health and wellbeing of children and in turn, can improve their performance and relationships with others in the classroom. However it is also my belief that decisions about using specific interventions or programmes are best made locally by head teachers, based on the needs of the children within their respective schools, without prescription from the Scottish Government or Education Scotland.

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I am pleased to read from your letter about the progress your programme is making, noting that it is rolling out in many local authority areas across central Scotland and that you have now secured support to pilot the programme in the Aberdeen area. I wish you every success for the future of the programme.

JOHN SWINNEY

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