

14th August 2020

Dear Mr Williamson (Secretary of State for Education)

I am writing to demonstrate clearly, the evidence that students at Whitley Bay High School, and most likely many other schools, have undoubtedly been disadvantaged by the algorithm applied to our Centre Assessed Grades by the examination boards, often with serious implications for our students' futures.

We are a large, successful school with one of the largest, school sixth forms in the country, where students consistently do well at both GCSE and A Level. In addition, the size of our Post 16 cohort largely eradicates large swings in our attainment and progress data.

As a school, we went through a very rigorous procedure to assign our Centre Assessed Grades, which included a three level moderation process. This process is fully documented and open for independent, external scrutiny. We were therefore confident that the results submitted were a fair and accurate reflection of what students would have achieved had they sat their exams.

The A level results we received yesterday, in no way reflect the ability and progress of this cohort of Yr.13 students nor did they fit the profile of our school's historical A Level data. Given this, we can only conclude that the algorithm used has produced serious inaccuracies.

This Yr.13 cohort, in terms of GCSE performance, were of a slightly higher ability than the Yr.13 cohort who left in 2019. They were working just as hard as last year's cohort and all our internal standardised data suggested they would have performed slightly better than last year.

We were therefore shocked to see our percentage of A* - B grades go down from 58.6% in 2019 to 51.9% this year. Indeed our percentage of A* to B grades has been on an upward trend since 2017 (2017: 55.2%, 2018: 57.0%, 2019 58.6%). We confidently expected this upward trend to continue. This 2020 A* - B percentage in no way reflects what these students would have achieved had they sat their exams. This lowering of our A* - B grades then had a cascade effect as more grades were moved from B to C, then C to D and then D to E. To put this in context this led to 207 (82%) out of our 253 Yr.13 students having one or more of their results downgraded.

The cumulative effect of this adjustment to our Centre Assessed Grades has had a catastrophic impact on the school's progress score. Using shadow data, our school's L3VA for 2020 is -0.25 and significantly negative – something the school has never had before. This means, all students across all subjects have performed on average a quarter of a grade lower than expected which, again, has never happened in this school. There is no evidence to suggest that this is a realistic outcome or would sit in the normal range of our results, for our students.

We will be making an appeal against these grades, however, that has been complicated by the surprise announcement the day before A Level results were issued to say verified mock results can be used. We still await official guidance on this, and this may not be available until next week at the earliest. Therefore, the appeals process is technically on hold.

Using mock grades with the huge variations in the way schools set, assess and moderate such exams is quite unbelievable and shows a lack of understanding of how schools operate very differently in terms of the purpose of these exams. The rigour applied to Centre Assessed Grades means, for most schools, they are a far better indicator of performance than the non-standardised and subjective mock grades that are now being suggested as an alternative to the grades awarded by the exam boards.

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Despite being promised otherwise by the government, Whitley Bay High School students have undoubtedly been significantly disadvantaged by the blunt standardisation process imposed on our Centre Assessed Grades by Ofqual. This is something that must be addressed here and at other schools

It is important to remember when discussing statistics that actual young people are being affected. Many students on results day received grades that were not an accurate indication of their ability or work. This then affects their Post 18 ambitions and future lives. The school will continue doing everything it can to provide help and guidance to students to reach their preferred Post 18 destinations, but the uncertainty makes this an almost impossible task.

While reverting to Centre Assessed Grades may have some issues for some students, it is clear that any perceived slight advantage students may have, is minimal compared to the huge disadvantage they are currently experiencing, following on from the disadvantage of missing education during lockdown. Therefore, I am calling for Centre Assessed Grades to be awarded if they are higher than the exam board grades students have received. This decision needs to be taken quickly to allow universities and other Post 18 providers to honour places.

I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely



Steve Wilson
Headteacher