

12th October 2020

Mr G Williamson
Secretary of State for Education
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

Dear Mr Williamson

I am compelled to write to you to explain the position we and, I am sure many schools across the country, find ourselves in. It is imperative that action is taken now, so that all students, and especially those in current Year 11 and Year 13, are not significantly disadvantaged by the current situation of disjointed communication and a lack of understanding of the impact of local lockdowns.

As I write this letter, we still:

- do not know the dates of next year's GCSE and A' Level examinations;
- await clarity on the exact content to be examined in many subjects;
- have a number of subjects, including Maths and Science, who have been told there will be no change to the content students will be examined on despite missing 5 months of face-to-face teaching;
- have no guidance on a "Plan B" in the event that GCSE and A' Level examinations cannot take place.

As a Comprehensive school in an area of local lockdown, all this is compounded by a situation where we have/had 20 cases of COVID-19 amongst our student population, resulting in large number of students having to self-isolate because they are close contacts of the affected students.

To put this in context, we have already had 400 students missing a further 2 weeks of school because of COVID-19. This includes 182 out of 370 Year 11 students and 80 of our Year 13 students who will be sitting their GCSE or A' Level exams at some stage in the summer.

As a school, we have been proactive in providing high quality on-line learning but, as you have said, this is not the same as the face-to-face learning that takes place within the classroom.

In the Ofqual consultation process I, and I am sure many other Headteachers, made it clear that if exams are to go ahead in the summer, which I hope they do, the very least the exam boards could do is look carefully at reducing the content to be examined and/or provide more choice for students. This would only seem reasonable given the experience of this cohort of Year 11 and Year 13 students across the country.

We also need to confirm there is a system in place to ensure students who miss even more school because of further periods of self-isolation are recognised and compensated by exam boards in some way for this loss to their education.

Moving forward, there will be huge regional variations in the amount of school students miss because of COVID-19 and this needs to be reflected in any future planning regarding the summer exams. We will, I am sure, have a situation where students return from one period of isolation and then have to be absent again for further periods. Such a state of affairs must be addressed.

The current situation is understandably causing our students anxiety and the lack of an apparent plan to address these real issues is causing further concern. I am not a person who only wishes to highlight issues without consider potential solutions. I consider:

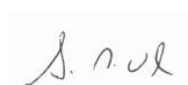
- All GCSE and A' level exams should have a reduced content, which can be achieved by providing more choice on the exam papers. This will give students greater clarity and confidence in these future key examinations and therefore reduce anxiety levels. This will give an equal opportunity for students nationally to achieve success. This would be a fairer and more balanced approach than the idea that delaying the exams by two to three weeks will compensate students in some way for the huge amount of schooling they have missed.
- Exam boards need to consider now what special consideration they will offer to students depending on how much additional face-to-face teaching they miss as a consequence of COVID-19. It may be the case that students, especially in areas of local lockdown, have numerous self-isolating periods across the year that must be recognised. It would not be fair to apply the same examination criteria to these students as students who have not missed any further schooling.
- The possibility of exams not taking place next summer needs to be considered as soon as possible and communicated to students, parents and schools. This will allow everyone to continue to prepare for exams while knowing there is a fall-back position should it be needed. This will give all concerned the clarity they need to move forward. This Plan B could take many forms including a return to Centre Assessed Grades, In-year Assessments combined with Centre Assessed Grades or the use of non-examined Assessments and coursework.

I am sure all of the things I mention are being considered but, if this is the case, this needs to be communicated more clearly to schools, students and parents.

I acknowledge these are unprecedented times providing challenges at every level. However, that also means the solutions will need to be exceptionally well considered in order to ensure this cohort of students are not let down. I am more than happy to help in this process but time is of the essence.

School leaders want to help you, Mr Williamson. We want to be part of the solution, not regarded as the problem. We have local knowledge and an understanding of how schools work that cannot be anything other than a huge resource to you and your team. I urge you to proactively respond to the above and provide improved communications of the outcomes.

Yours sincerely



STEVE WILSON
Headteacher/National Leader in Education

Cc Sir Alan Campbell, MP

Norma Redfearn, Mayor of North Tyneside