

Rt Hon John Healey MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP LONDON SW1A 0AA
Secretary of State
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

8 December 2020

Dear Gavin

Last week you announced extra measures for exams taken in 2021 in recognition that “some young people have had their teaching disrupted more than others and will need extra support to catch up on the curriculum and achieve their potential in exams.” The confirmation that Ministers accept both the disruption students face in their learning and the differential difficulties this is causing is certainly welcome, though long overdue.

This comes after months of students, parents and teachers – and Labour – asking how the government will deal with the challenges facing schools and how next summer’s exams will be conducted fairly.

You have received a letter from Elaine Renavent, headteacher at Wickersley School in my constituency, who told you that, in the first eight weeks of term, almost three quarters of students in year 11 (241 out of 337 students, 72%) have missed time in school due to self-isolation.

As she points out, there will be an inequality of access to education, within schools and across the country. Remote learning cannot be a substitute for face-to-face teaching.

I had become increasingly concerned by reports from students about the disruption to their learning and worries about falling behind. So I carried out research with the secondary schools across my constituency which has shown that – just two months after returning in September – at least half of students in the years critical to exams (Y10-13) have missed school time due to self-isolation. Across the schools, the range was between 55 and 70%. In one year 10 cohort, 96% of students had had to take time off school, and in another 77% had been absent because they were self-isolating.

My research also found that:

- Many students do not have a laptop or suitable device at home for remote learning and a significant number have no internet access. Your updated remote education guidance, which says that secondary schools should provide at least four hours a day of remote education, does nothing to help these young people.

- Mental health problems among students and staff have increased.
- Headteachers do not feel they are receiving sufficient information from the government about exams in 2021 and 2022.

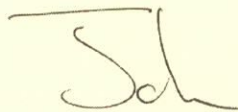
Students will try their best in the most challenging of circumstances, but it is inevitable that those who have lost the most learning will suffer the greatest disadvantage when they take exams next summer. The government has been too slow to get to grips with this, and the measures announced this week do not go far enough.

You have said there will be “more generous grading than usual, in line with national outcomes from 2020”. We know that, this summer, while grades rose across the board, pupils in private schools tended to see a sharper rise. The government must ensure the distribution of grades is spread evenly across schools and postcodes to ensure all students are treated fairly and the most disadvantaged pupils do not lose out.

Over the longer term, the government must consider the impact of the pandemic on the current years 10 and 12, and the exams they are due to sit in 2022.

I look forward to hearing from you on these points.

Yours ever

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Healey', written over a horizontal line.

JOHN HEALEY MP
Wentworth & Dearne