



## Covid-19: Educational Settings - Summary

House of Commons - Debate Summary - House of Commons

07/01/2021

The Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, began by saying this was not a decision the Government had ever wanted to take, and reassured the House that this did not mean schools were suddenly unsafe.

He would set out the contingency plans he had prepared but had hoped he'd never had to put into action. This included: early years settings would remain open nationally to all; schools would close except to vulnerable children and the children of critical workers; and universities would predominantly study online, with a few exceptions to those studying healthcare, social care and education.

Williamson said the Government had set out legally binding guidance for state-funded schools to deliver quality online learning, which would be enforced by Ofsted, and that they had stepped up the availability of online learning. He went further to say that more than 560,000 laptops and tablets had already been delivered, with an extra 100,000 being delivered this week alone.

He further noted that the Government were working with major UK mobile network operators to provide free access at education sites – supported by EE, 3, Tesco Mobile, Smarty, Sky Mobile, Virgin Mobile, O2 and Vodafone – as well as delivering free 4G hubs to families who need it.

Although the Government still believed exams were the fairest form of assessment for students, he said it would not be possible to hold them this year. GCSEs, AS and A level summer exams would not be going ahead – the DfE and Ofqual would fine-tune and consult on contingency options, which he said would likely include teacher-assessed grades.

On vocational and technical qualifications (VQs), he said he wanted to allow schools and colleges to continue where they feel able to do so this month.

On free school meals (FSM) he said the Government would be providing extra funding to support schools to provide food parcels or meals, and where they couldn't offer parcels, there would be a national voucher scheme in place.

On testing, he said regular testing would take place in schools and would help them to reopen as soon as possible, and would be centre of plans to return young people to the classroom.

Kate Green, shadow secretary of state for Education, welcomed the commitment to digital devices, but cited Ofqual estimates that 1.78m children were without access to devices, and asked if he could guarantee that every child without would have one as soon as possible. She also asked if the data deal with mobile providers would take effect immediately.

She asked the Education Secretary if he could guarantee that children eligible for FSM were already receiving support, or that they would start to receive it in the coming days if not. She also asked when

teachers would receive support for grading, what form it would take, and if it would be available in all schools .

On VQTs, she said Williamson had failed to show leadership on exams taking place in January , and asked if he would cancel this week's BTECs . She also asked if the JCVI were working on a strategy to vaccinate all education staff, and if the Secretary agreed that they should be prioritised .

Green pressed the Education Secretary to disclose what scientific advice he had received to say that early years and childcare settings were safe to remain open . She further pushed him to reconsider the decision to move EY funding in line with current occupancy, which she said could push some providers to brink of collapse .

Finally, she noted that the Prime Minister couldn't guarantee that children would be back in school before summer, and asked if the Secretary could say when he expected children to be safely back in the classroom .

In response, Williamson noted that three-quarters of a million devices would be rolled out by the end of next week . He said the Government had helped to set up and support Oak National Academy and wanted to see it used more as a vital teaching resource .

On training and support for teachers grading, he said this would be delivered , and further reaffirmed that the best way of assessing children was through examination, and so he wouldn't apologise for being enthusiastic about trying to keep them on .

On VQTs he said it was important that colleges, schools and providers were given the flexibility to decide, particularly as there were young people who needed to complete competency assessments in order to take up work .

On vaccinations , he said the Government had set out plans to vaccinate the most vulnerable, and of course he wanted to see all those in educational settings vaccinated .

Williamson reaffirmed that they had listened to scientific and public health advice, and that early years education was important for every child, so when he was told they could be in a position to keep them open, he decided to do so .

He said he would do everything he could to ensure every school could open as soon as possible .

Robert Halfon (Con, Harlow) , Chair of the Education Committee , asked the Secretary to confirm that students who didn't have connection or devices at home would be able to go into school alongside vulnerable children and the children of key workers .

He also asked him to confirm that the centre-assessed grading (CAG) system would maintain standards and provide a level playing field for disadvantaged children, with a fair appeals process .

He asked if the Department would make sure independent assessors were available to provide a check and balance on CAGs , and suggested the use of retired teachers and Ofsted inspectors.

Finally, he asked Williamson if he would do everything possible to ensure teachers and support staff were given priority access to the vaccine .

Williamson confirmed that children without access to internet and devices would be able to go into school still . He also said he would be happy to work with Halfon and the Education Committee on any additional actions that could be taken to ensure fairness, and would take on board his idea to bring in retirees as independent assessors .

Carol Monaghan (SNP, Glasgow North West) , shadow SNP spokesperson for Education asked the Secretary to confirm that educational resources from the BBC would be available for the Scottish curriculum . She also pressed Williamson to ensure staff were given priority for vaccination .

On university students, she asked what support the Government would provide to those who were still having to pay for university accommodation, despite being unable to access it .

Williamson said he would contact the Director-General of the BBC on the points she had raised about Scottish curriculum coverage, and write back to her with details .

Daisy Cooper (LD, St Albans) , Lib Dem Spokesperson for Education , said it was essential that the Government gave school staff access to vaccinations and asked if the Secretary would look at adding them to category 7 on the JCVI scale.

Williamson responded that they were ready to roll out the mass testing programme as they welcomed pupils into schools in the coming weeks .

Dr Luke Evans ( Con, Bosworth) asked Williamson to confirm that the substitute system would be robust and fair, that pupils would not be disadvantaged by the school they went to, and that teachers would have buy-in and ownership of what they were doing. The Secretary responded that they had the advantage of time to roll out extensive training, guidance and support.

Rachel Hopkins ( Lab, Luton South) asked what plans the Government had to provide additional mental health support for children and young people. Williamson said he would work with the sector to support students, and that the Government had already taken several actions to offer support.

Mike Amesbury , shadow minister for Housing and Planning, asked why the Secretary was sticking with the company Computacenter, which had been awarded the £96 m contract with no competition, but failed to deliver all the laptop kits to vulnerable children in the first lockdown .

Williamson paid tribute to Computacenter and said that, since the first lockdown, tenders had gone out and the company had won them through fair competition.

Paula Barker ( Lab, Liverpool, Wavertree) asked the Secretary to fully explain why nurseries and early years settings were not closing, with the exception of providing services to the children of key workers . Williamson said that "early evidence from SAGE has shown that early years provision had a smaller relative impact on transmission rates than primary schools, which in turn had a smaller relative impact than secondary schools ."

Tim Loughton ( Con, East Worthing and Shoreham) asked the Secretary to make the February half-term the default target date for return. Williamson said he wanted to see all schools opening on 22 February, but that they obviously had to take into account the scientific and health advice.

Sarah Olney ( LD, Richmond Park) , Liberal Democrat spokesperson for BEIS and for Transport, asked if the Secretary would bring forward the release of grades this year to allow students time to plan their next steps, or begin the appeals and resits process.

Williamson said this was something he had already raised in discussions with Ofqual and that it was under consideration.

Lilian Greenwood ( Lab, Nottingham South) asked if it was fair for university students to continue to pay full fees and full rent when they were not receiving the university experience they expected. She also asked what support would be offered to those facing financial hardship.

Williamson said the Government had announced additional support for university students, with an extra package to help those who were most vulnerable.

Jonathan Gullis ( Con, Stoke-on-Trent North) , member of the Education Committee, asked if the Secretary would work with him and the Minister for School Standards to get textbooks to disadvantaged pupils so they were not limited by the digital divide. Williamson said a meeting was being organised to work on this.

Paul Blomfield, shadow minister for Brexit and EU Negotiations, asked if the Secretary would cancel this year's SATs in primary schools, to which Williamson responded that they would not be proceeding with the assessments this year.

Joy Morrissey (Con, Beaconsfield) asked if private candidates, such as home education children, would be able to obtain a grade, unlike last year. Williamson said he had asked Ofqual to take up this issue and make sure that there are measures in place so that those students will be in a position to get a grade.

Simon Fell (Con, Barrow and Furness) asked the Secretary to look again at vaccination for staff in SEND schools, and review catch-up funding for all schools so that it is targeted. Williamson said he would make those arguments on SEND schools "forcefully."

Sitting suspended.

House adjourned.

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