

Education Secretary statement to MPs on education recovery and qualifications

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement regarding the opening of educational settings, our plans to help children catch up and the arrangements we have put in place for qualifications.

The Prime Minister announced on Monday a cautious road map for the gradual relaxation of our current social restrictions. It isn't quite the end, but the end is very clearly in sight. As the House is by now aware, the rates of Covid infection have come down enough for us let children go back to school from Monday 8th March. Secondary and college students will be back from that date after being offered an onsite Covid test.

University students on practical courses who need to access specialist facilities can also return to campus from the 8th March. And we'll be reviewing the timing for the return of remaining students during the Easter holidays.

Mr Speaker, the Prime Minister spoke of a one-way road to freedom for this reason we have issued detailed guidance about what we expect all our education settings to do welcome students back

There will be a robust testing regime in place that will be critical in breaking the chains of Covid infection. More than 4 million tests have already been completed across primary, secondary schools, colleges and universities.

I know that staff have worked very hard to set up testing sites in schools and have had time to get used to supervising the testing that goes on. I know that the whole House will join me in thanking every one of them for the incredible efforts they continue to make to keep young people safe and learning. Primary school staff will continue to receive two home tests a week and this will be extended to private early years providers.

Secondary school and college students will be offered three tests in school or college when they return over the first two weeks, to be undertaken 3 to 5 days apart.

Students will then be offered two home tests per week so they can test themselves regularly. Schools will be able to retain small on-site testing facilities for those who cannot and haven't been able to test at home.

Staff and students at independent learning providers and adult community learning providers will also be able to test at home. On-site testing facilities are already set up in universities, and staff and students there can take two tests a week.

We are following public health guidance and advising that, in circumstances where social distancing cannot be maintained, face coverings should be worn in secondary school classrooms, as well as in further and higher education settings.

This is a temporary measure, to ensure the safe return of schools, and will be in place until Easter.

All the other safety measures that are already in place continue to be robust, including bubble groups, staggered start and finish times, increasing ventilation and strict hygiene measures.

Mr Speaker, this has been a hugely challenging time for teachers, staff, and parents. The House will be well aware of the incredible work that has already gone into minimising the effects of this pandemic.

But I know from the research we've been conducting that it won't be enough. Many children are going to need longer term support to make up for lost learning. We want families to know that there will be support for schools and for our children.

Sir Kevan Collins, our Education Recovery Commissioner, will be working with parents, teachers and schools on a long-term plan to make sure pupils have the chance to make up their learning over the course of their education. As an immediate support we're putting in place a range of additional measures to help children and young people across England to help them catch up.

We are introducing a new one-off £302 million Recovery Premium for state primary and secondary schools, building on the Pupil Premium, to further support pupils who need it most.

We are expanding our successful tutoring programmes. £200 million will be available to fund an extended National Tutoring Programme for primary and secondary schools and tutoring and language support in colleges and early years settings.

£200m will be available for secondary schools to deliver face-to-face summer schools. . The package will build on the £1bn catch-up package we announced last June and forms part of the wider response to help pupils make up on the lost learning they've suffered. Mr Speaker I would now like to update the House on the next steps after we decided that GCSE, AS and A level exams and many vocational and technical qualifications could not go ahead as planned this summer.

In January we launched a joint consultation with Ofqual on the best way to do this, so that the results for 2021 are as robust and as fair as possible. I am very glad to say that we got more than 100,000 responses from students, parents, teachers, school leaders and other stakeholders as part of that consultation and we considered all of them very carefully. I would like to assure Honourable and Right Honourable colleagues that there was widespread support for our approach that we are taking.

Our priority is, and has always been, to make sure every student has the best

possible chance to show what they know and can do, enabling them to progress to the next stage of their education, training, or employment.

The most important thing we can do is make sure that the system is fair, that it is fair to every student. It is vital that they have confidence that they will get the grade that is a just reflection of their work.

Mr Speaker, this year's students will receive grades determined by their teachers, with assessments covering what they were taught, and not what they have missed. Teachers have a good understanding of their students' performance and how they compare to other students this year and those from previous years.

Teachers can choose a range of evidence, to underpin their assessments, including coursework, in-class tests set by the school, and the use of optional questions provided by exam boards and mock exams and we will, of course, give guidance on how best to do this fairly and also consistently.

Exam boards will be issuing grade descriptions to help teachers make sure their assessments are fair and consistent. These will be broadly pegged to performance standards from previous years so teachers and students are clear what is expected at each grade. By doing this combined with a rigorous quality assurance process, are just two of the ways this system will ensure grades are fair, and consistent. Quality assurance by the exam boards will provide a meaningful check in the system and make sure we can root out malpractice.

We will also set out a full and fair appeals system. It will provide a process to enable students to appeal their grades should they believe their grade is wrong grade given is wrong.

Mr Speaker, I can confirm no algorithm will be used for this process, grades will be awarded on the basis of teachers' judgement and will only ever be changed by human intervention. There must of course be as much fairness and rigour applied to vocational and technical qualifications as there is to general qualifications as well. For those qualifications most similar to GCSEs, AS and A levels which enable people to progress onto further and higher education, external exams will not go ahead and results will be awarded through similar arrangements as set out for GCSEs and A levels.

However, where students are taking VTQs to go straight into a job, exams and assessments should take place in line with public health measures. This is so that students can demonstrate the occupational or professional standards they need to enter the workplace safely.

Mr Speaker, all our children and young people have paid a considerable price for the disruption of the past year. It has knocked their learning off track, it has put their friendships to one side and it has put some of the wonder of growing up on hold. In short, Mr Speaker, it has caused enormous damage to what should have been a carefree and exciting part of growing up.

I am absolutely committed that with this programme of catch-up measures and

the extra funds for tutoring we can start to put his right. Together with the measures we have set out for a fair and robust allocation of grades, young people will be able to look forward to the next stage of their lives with confidence. Our approach, in the face of the worst disruption to education since the second world war, has been to protect the progress of pupils and students. Ultimately this summer's assessments will ensure fair routes to the next stages of education or the start of a career.

That is our overall aim.

Mr Speaker, in summing up, I'm sure you would agree with my assessment, that as a nation we have, perhaps, never valued education as much as we do today. And I commend this statement to the House.