



HOUSE OF COMMONS

## Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Accountability hearings](#), HC 82

Wednesday 20 April 2022

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Caroline Ansell; Miriam Cates; Anna Firth; Tom Hunt; Dr Caroline Johnson; Kim Johnson; Ian Mearns.

Questions 1232-1347

### Witnesses

**I:** Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP, Secretary of State for Education, Department for Education, and Andrew McCully, Director General, Schools, Department for Education.

Written evidence from witnesses:



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon. Nadhim Zahawi MP and Andrew McCully.

**Chair:** Good morning, Secretary of State. Thank you for coming today. For the benefit of the tape, and those watching on parliamentary television, could I ask you to introduce yourselves and give your title?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Good morning, Committee. It is Nadhim Zahawi, Secretary of State for Education.

**Andrew McCully:** Good morning, everyone. I am Andrew McCully. I am the Director General for Schools in the Department for Education.

Q1232 **Chair:** Thank you. Nadhim, yesterday statistics were released detailing the percentage of staff attending work. For the DfE, only 25% of staff were attending the workplace—one of the lowest in any Whitehall Department. Why is this figure so low, and why is it that teaching and support staff go to school, rightly, and have done so much to try and keep our children learning, and yet in the Department so many officials are working from home? Is it one rule for the professional classes and another rule for the workers—for the teachers and support staff?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** No, it is not. The team, the Department, I think, since I was appointed Secretary of State back in September, has delivered everything from the skills legislation to the schools White Paper to the SEND Green Paper. I would just put on record my thanks for the incredible work that my civil servants had to do, under difficult circumstances, including, of course, coping with omicron in the middle of that—

Q1233 **Chair:** Why are you the lowest—I think it is the Department with the lowest number of people actually going in?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I do not disagree with you.

Q1234 **Chair:** Is covid rife in the Department? Is that why people have not been coming in?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** No. A couple of things. One, the particular data release was a snapshot in April, which coincided, obviously, with recess, when I was out of the Department as well for part of that time.

**Chair:** You are just one person.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I hear you, but I am just about to get to the point. The straight answer is that we have got to do better. My instruction from my Prime Minister, from Cabinet yesterday, is that we have got to go back to pre-covid working and office use. That is what we will do, and you will see us improve. I think it is important that we look at productivity—output—as well as people being in the office, because I want to see my teams get out there, visiting schools, early years, colleges, universities, and of course local government—

Q1235 **Chair:** All I am saying is that if you are saying, rightly, that teaching and



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support staff should be in school, putting their health at risk every day, doing their best to keep our children learning, it seems wrong that so many members of the professional classes in the Department are at home, not in the Department. I do not understand why your Department has amongst the lowest amount of people actually in the Department compared with other Departments. In some Departments, 60% of people are in the Department, for example.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** You will see those numbers improve. We are going back to pre-covid working; I expect offices to return to normality pre the pandemic. That is my instruction to my teams; that is what you will see happen. I was just trying to lay out for you that actually the teams have delivered; but you are right to challenge us and say we need to be back in the Department. Actually, it is the most junior members of staff who struggle the most, because to have that mentoring, that career progression, you need to be in the office—you need to be together. My instruction to the team is that we go back immediately to pre-covid working and offices.

**Chair:** Very quickly, on this point, Caroline Johnson.

Q1236 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I have two supplementary questions. First, over what timeframe do you expect people to return to the office? Secondly, what proportion of your staff that are not currently coming in to the office, or not currently coming in to the office most of the time, receive extra pay for working in London as a London weighting, and does that offer you opportunities as a Department for greater financial efficiency?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** There is always opportunity to look at financial efficiency. Let me give you an example. We have, for example, a fantastic hub in Sheffield. We have doubled the number of staff there to 1,500 now working out of Sheffield. In answer to your question around timing, the Cabinet was very clear yesterday that it needs to happen immediately—that we go back to pre-pandemic office use.

Q1237 **Chair:** My point is that if teaching and support staff are putting their health at risk and doing everything, against the odds, to keep our kids learning, it does not set a good example if the DfE is the worst Department for attendance back in the Department.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I do not disagree with you; that will change. The only point I would make is you also want your teams out in the field. You want them to be in schools, in colleges—

Q1238 **Chair:** These figures are about working from home.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Absolutely.

Q1239 **Chair:** If I may move on to the antisemitism issue in education, what is the Department doing to require universities to adopt the international definition of antisemitism? You will be aware of the recent controversy with the NUS and rap singer Lowkey, which upset many Jewish students. Can you tell the Committee in what circumstances it is acceptable for Jewish students to have their concerns ignored, and told they needed to



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seek out a safe space, as you are aware? I know that the universities Minister has commented on this. Do you believe that the NUS is institutionally antisemitic? What action is your Department taking to condemn this practice? Will you continue to recognise the NUS as a body organisation that represents the voices of students, given that they seemingly consistently do not seem to be a safe space for those students who are Jewish?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** On the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition, I held a summit with Minister Donelan in January to make sure we continue to push forward. I want every higher education institution to sign up to IHRA, and I want those who do not to explain to me why they have not. The scourge of antisemitism remains with us. Some of the Committee members will remember my visit to Auschwitz, and the horrors of the holocaust make me feel doubly determined to make sure we root this out.

I am deeply concerned about the NUS. It feels to me that there is systemic antisemitism, because this is the second time, I think, that they have elected a leader who has a history of antisemitic comments and statements. That does concern me. I think the majority of students would never tolerate any form of antisemitism, and many student representative organisations and unions do the right thing. I am worried about the NUS.

Michelle Donelan is looking at how we deal with this issue. It is not acceptable in my view that anyone in a leadership position in that organisation holds or propagates these views in any way. They need to regain the trust of Jewish students, because at the moment that trust has collapsed completely, and rightly so. There is a lot of work that the NUS needs to do to get itself back into—I wouldn't even say "a good place"—being a proper functioning representative organisation.

My worry is that it feels like the NUS is going through the same sad predicament that we saw with the Labour party under Corbyn, where you have antisemitism rife and leaders within it either participating or turning a blind eye to it. That is unacceptable, and you will see more from us and from Michelle Donelan on this.

Q1240 **Chair:** In what sense? What will happen?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** We are looking at everything, obviously, including charitable status, which I know you have also asked the Charity Commission to look at. No option is off the table, including our relationship with the NUS.

Q1241 **Chair:** Thank you. If I could move on to the White Paper, obviously I think it is a good statement of intent, and I welcomed it in the House of Commons. Could you just explain to the Committee what a "knowledge-rich curriculum" means?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Absolutely. My very strong view from my visits to schools around the country is that children need to be able to have the foundations right. Being able to do maths and English opens up the



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opportunity to be good at other subjects, and to get that knowledge-richness in your academic life. I did not know I was good at maths until I learned to speak the language—in fact, until I learned to think in the language. I did not know I was good at biology and human biology and chemistry. That opens up huge opportunities, hence why the White Paper’s focus is very much on making sure that the targets at end of primary school—at the moment we are nowhere near good enough, with only two thirds of children finishing primary school with the prerequisite ability in maths and English, and we want to lift that to 90%. The targets at secondary school in terms of GCSE in English and maths are for the average grade to move up from 4.5 to 5—

Q1242 **Chair:** I am just trying to understand in a nutshell what a “knowledge-rich curriculum” means.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** It means that the ability for children to learn the richness of subjects, whether it is the sciences and STEM, history or English literature, is there for them. That is what a knowledge-rich curriculum is, in my view.

Q1243 **Chair:** Obviously, it is great to see the Government embracing the need for a skills ecosystem, but while you talk about knowledge rich, you don’t also talk about skills rich, because you seem to say that that should be done only post-16. As the saying goes, you give a man a fish and you give him a meal; you teach a man to fish and you give him a meal for life. What’s the point of teaching children the names of fish in the river if you don’t then teach them how to fish? What I am saying to you is that the White Paper should have had more on skills for pre-16—more skills in the curriculum on financial education, oracy and careers education, and embedding that in the school ecosystem. These are not woolly subjects; this is not some kind of progressive thing. You need both to have the knowledge and be able to apply it. Your White Paper seems to be all about one side of the equation, but not the other. How will the Government ensure that schools develop children so that they have the skills they need for the world of work, beginning at an early age? It can’t just be, as you have got on your label, the T-levels. It must be pre-16 as much as post-16.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I do not disagree with a word you have said there, Chair. The bit that I do disagree with is the characterisation of the White Paper as lacking in that ability to develop children in a rounded way. What do I mean by that? If you look at the evidence in the White Paper around high-performing, strong leadership, strong multi-academy trusts and strong families of schools, very much part of what they do is the stuff you describe, whether it is extra-curricular activities, teamworking or the ability to present an argument and make a speech. I have seen all these things delivered.

Q1244 **Chair:** But that is not in your White Paper.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Hold on a second. This is where I am respectfully saying that I disagree with you, in the sense that the White Paper focuses on a journey to make sure every school is part of a strong, high-performing



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multi-academy trust in that family of schools. That is what will deliver those experiences for children. Our focus on the Gatsby measures is what will deliver that knowledge of the workplace for children.

Q1245 **Chair:** It does not mention skills very much in the White Paper.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** We have a massive skills agenda—

Q1246 **Chair:** But that's post-16. That's brilliant, and I love the skills agenda—I have said it in the House of Commons—but that is all post-16. It seems to me that you have had the traditionalists go through this. Everything is knowledge rich, knowledge rich—fine. I am not against any of that, but God forbid you mention the word “skills” pre-16 in the White Paper. The ghost of Nick Gibb lives on in the Department. I find it extraordinary, really, that pre-16 skills are not regarded as important as, as you call it, knowledge rich.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** What Nick Gibb delivered in the Department has allowed me to be able to deliver an ambitious White Paper, which would not have happened without things like the phonics work that he did—the phonics screening—and the real focus on the foundations that you need before you can discover all the other things that you can do by getting a great education. That is important, and I would defend it to the end of my days in this job. What I would say to you is, “Join me. Come with me, and I will show you why what we say in the White Paper about high-performing families of schools delivers the skills that”—

Q1247 **Chair:** I think Nick Gibb did a lot of good on literacy and phonics, and I think he should be praised for it, but I always had a debate with him, going back to the fish argument. Basically, your paper is just about people learning the names of fish. It isn't about teaching people to fish, to go back to the analogy that I used earlier.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** No, I disagree fundamentally, because I would say to you, “Join me”, and you and I will go together to high-performing families of schools, and you will see that their focus is very much on delivering that rounded skills and education for children—

Q1248 **Chair:** Okay. I am not saying that schools are not delivering. I know that schools are delivering individually—

**Nadhim Zahawi:** But the White Paper basically sets out the road map for that; that is the whole point.

Q1249 **Chair:** It does not even mention the word “skills”, or the words “financial education”, as far as I am aware; I may have missed them, obviously.

Let me give you an example and then I will move on soon to my colleagues. You have just announced—and this is what I mean by a focus on knowledge-rich—£4 million for Latin. Now, I have no problem with that; it is a great subject and I hope that everybody learns it. But this is very symbolic of my whole argument with you, because we know that the Lords Committee—the Economic Affairs Committee, chaired by Lord Forsyth, which reported on youth unemployment—found that design and



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technology GCSE can boost lifetime earnings. However, take-up of design and technology GCSE has gone down by 70% since 2010.

We know that pupils who take those kinds of subjects have the highest undiscounted lifetime earnings, at £1.8 million. Engineering is the same. So, your focus again is sort of the ghost of the traditionalists; it is very much Mr Chips, rather than “Hello, James Dyson”, as I keep saying. Why is it that you are investing £4 million in Latin, yet you are quite happy to see the decline in design and technology, which is not part of the baccalaureate?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** The EBacc was deliberately narrow in focus, to allow schools to be able to continue to do design and technology at primary and of course to do it at secondary as well. Again, I would respectfully push back and say that you mention Latin, which is £4 million out of a total budget of £56 billion.

Q1250 **Chair:** Yes, but you don’t put out, “We’re putting £4 million into design and technology to encourage more take-up”. Let’s see how many people get jobs doing design and technology, or through investment in design and technology, or Latin. Let’s see—not that Latin is not an important subject. It’s a wonderful subject and I—

**Nadhim Zahawi:** It is not a trade-off, Chair. Forgive me—it’s not a trade-off.

Q1251 **Chair:** No, it isn’t—it’s all one way. Post-16 is all one way.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** No, I don’t agree. The fundamental backbone of my White Paper is saying that we want the evidence from those high-performing, multi-academy trusts that deliver that rounded education, those skills for life, as well as really high levels of knowledge-rich education—that is what we want to deliver by 2030, and here is how we are going to do it. If we do that well and if we do it right, then the outcome is the one you desire, as much as I do.

Q1252 **Chair:** Let me move on. It is relevant to—just finally—the absent children. You said that £4 million is not a huge amount. Well, if it is not a huge amount, how can you then justify spending a similar amount on trying to get severely absent children back into school, because you have said that it will be £5 million? You know that the Children’s Commissioner has estimated that 124,000 children have become absent children as a result of the pandemic; there is similar analysis from the Centre for Social Justice. Your own Department says that 11% of state-funded school pupils were absent. Out of those 800,000 pupils, 200,000 were believed to be absent for covid reasons, but 600,000 were absent for other reasons.

You spend £4 million on Latin and the same amount trying to get all these children back into school. The Department’s plans to tackle severe absence are limited to one local authority and up to a maximum of 1,000 children. So what are you going to do to get these 124,000 children back to school, or the almost 600,000 children who have become severely



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absent? What immediate action is the Department taking? How many of these “ghost” children have been returning to school?

I have been going on about this since last summer and it seems to me that not a lot is being done. You are more interested in funding Latin, which receives the same amount—well, just £1 million less—that is provided to fund this programme. What are you doing to get these people back to school? What are the targets?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Let me try to go through this in some detail, because I know it is something that you quite rightly have focused on and I have focused on in the Department.

The White Paper sets out clear expectations for how schools, trusts and local authorities should support high attendance. What do I mean by that? We will require schools to publish a clear attendance policy. We expect schools and local authorities to make really effective use of the data to identify and intervene early, because we know that data transparency is the best way to reform any system.

There is the commitment to the national register. There are some children being taught—it is important to say this, and I have seen it in my own constituency—at home, and home learning environments can be excellent. I have seen it in my constituency with parents doing that but, to your point, the 120,000-plus children who are not in education is unacceptable. That is why the national register is so important. It is not just about the £5 million. It is about making sure that, through the work of the alliance and bringing together local government, police and education, we do something now, as well as in the White Paper and the legislation that will come in the next Session of Parliament.

Q1253 **Chair:** In a nutshell, what is the target for getting these kids back into school?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I want to see the work of the alliance immediately, but ultimately the White Paper will set the very clear outcomes—

Q1254 **Chair:** That will be next year, by the time the White Paper is implemented. You have got legislation to come—

**Nadhim Zahawi:** We are not waiting for that.

Q1255 **Chair:** What is your target? Of the 124,000—or 600,000 children who become severely absent, how many of them do you want to get back by the end of the year? There must be a target.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I want to get back all children. I have seen some great work—

Q1256 **Chair:** But how? What is the target to get these kids back into school?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** The target, as I hope I have explained, is the work of the alliance, the here and now, which says that this is unacceptable. I need to know how we work much closer together between police, local government and schools. We have got seven measures that we are



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measuring ourselves against. Let's deliver those as well as the work of the White Paper that says there is an expectation of every school to make sure they publish what their attendance policy is. We expect work between them and collaboration between them and MATs and local government to ensure that no child is left behind. Ultimately, I can only give you a target once I've got the register. I don't know what the numbers are. These are all estimates.

Q1257 **Chair:** We do know. We have rough figures from the Children's Commissioner.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Of course, but ultimately it is only once I've got the register in place that I can say—

Q1258 **Chair:** Personally, I think you should set out a serious plan for how to get these kids back to school.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** We are, through the alliance.

Q1259 **Chair:** It's been going on since last summer.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I hear you, but we are, through the work in the here and now—

Q1260 **Chair:** It's going up, not going down.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Because of the pandemic.

Q1261 **Chair:** But kids have been back in school since last March.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I don't disagree with you, which is why, as you say, it is a priority.

Q1262 **Chair:** Finally, you rightly said that it was wrong to close the schools. I think that was a very important statement. As you know, right from the beginning I did not want the schools to close. They were open for vulnerable children and key workers, but most vulnerable children did not go.

I took a Bill through Parliament with the help of the parents group, Us For Them. The schools infrastructure Bill says that schools should be treated like any other infrastructure and that if schools were ever to be closed again, there would be a triple lock. You would have to get approval from the Children's Commissioner, you would have to have a vote in Parliament, and you would return every few weeks to vote again on whether those schools should be closed.

I should say that the Bill has been backed by the current Children's Commissioner, Rachel de Souza, and the previous Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield, along with a number of colleagues from all parts of the House of Commons. Given that you have said it was wrong to close the schools, will you give full backing to the schools infrastructure Bill that I introduced in Parliament?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I absolutely stand by what I have said and that it was a mistake. I will also write to the covid inquiry setting out what I think they



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should look at in terms of children and education, but I hope that we will never ever be in a place where we close down education, because we know the harm, both in terms of mental health and educational attainment, that it did. I am going to push back slightly, because you know me well enough. I have limited legislative space. I have to focus on skills, schools and families. I have a big schools White Paper, an SEND Green Paper and a review on children's social care. For the first time—certainly in my political life in the Department—I have an opportunity to weave together a system that delivers for every child, wherever they are in the country. I am passionate about this; you know that. I came to this country without the ability to speak English, but with parents who knew the value of education. I want the system to work for every child.

**Chair:** You don't need to do anything; I will do it all. It is a private Member's Bill. You could just support it.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I hear you. All I would say is that is that I do—

**Chair:** But you don't need to do anything. Your Department—

**Nadhim Zahawi:** But I do. Every time we have to do something, I have to have people in my Department stop what they are doing and do something else.

Q1263 **Chair:** In principle, do you support it, even if you can't—

**Nadhim Zahawi:** In principle, I think it was a mistake, and I will do everything in my power to never again be in a position to close schools.

Q1264 **Chair:** In principle, do you think that the school infrastructure built back by the current and previous Children's Commissioners is a good idea?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I think it certainly highlights the importance of the issue. As we reflect on how we dealt with a pandemic, it is right that we face up to the mistakes, and it was clearly a mistake.

Q1265 **Ian Mearns:** Secretary of State, on attendance, you are talking about bringing together an alliance of local authorities, police and schools. With what will they do their work? I talk to the chief constable and the chief executive of my local authority; they are absolutely and utterly strapped for cash. What we are doing is handing over yet another responsibility for them to solve a particular problem without any resources to effectively do that. I am afraid that what you are talking about sounds like a vague aspiration; unless you actually give local authorities the tools to do the job, it is a completely and utterly vague aspiration. I do not think we need to wait for data to be collected—the collection of data can go hand in hand with action on the ground now, but that action can only effectively happen if the people on the ground have some resources with which to do the work. Kids are missing out on education now, Secretary of State. This is a matter of extreme urgency.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** It is, and the alliance and the work it has done to bring together leaders from children's social care and education and the police and allied services are the right thing to do. The national register is the



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right thing to do, because, with it, we can begin to challenge ourselves and support local government. I had deep discussions with the Children's Commissioner on this matter. Some of the returns she was getting for her work just did not sound like the reality, in parts of the country, as to whether the Government actually knew who was or was not in school.

**Q1266 Ian Mearns:** Can I just point something out to you, Secretary of State? In the conclusion to the White Paper, you say: "This white paper marks the start of a journey towards an education system in which all children benefit from the high standards of the best schools and families of schools". Your party has been in government for 12 years. How is it the start of a journey now? I do not understand that. I accept that you haven't been the Secretary of State throughout that time, but you have been in government for 12 years. I am afraid that some of your predecessors have systematically denuded the Education Department with the data that you will now, importantly, try to rely on to build this new system to get kids back into school.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I will bring in Andrew in a second on the attendance issue but, very briefly, you ask what we have done in the last 12 years. Look at the performance of the schools that became academies. We are about to announce our 10,000th academy—that is real scale. When you have roughly 22,000 schools in the system, getting to 10,000 is real scale. Not all of them are in high-performing families of schools or a strong multi-academy trust, but that is what the White Paper will address. To your point, seven out of 10 schools that became academies due to underperformance now have a good or outstanding Ofsted rating, versus one in 10 of the local authority-maintained schools that they replaced.

**Q1267 Ian Mearns:** Secretary of State, they may have that rating, but quite a number of the outstanding schools in particular have not actually been inspected for a number of years. They were outstanding at the time of inspection, but we do not actually know if they are still outstanding. Many of them have had several changes of headteacher, and of course the headteacher and the leadership of the school are crucial to a school's performance. They still have an outstanding Ofsted rating, but we do not definitely know that that is the case.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Which is why Ofsted is circling back to do those inspections—

**Ian Mearns:** Belatedly.

**Andrew McCully:** Mr Mearns, for the important point of clarity, the Secretary of State is right that the all-important register of children in secondary education needs legislation to back it, and subject to final decisions on the Queen's Speech, that is on the cards. With the legislation will come money. Local authorities, with a new duty to provide that register, will be funded to do that. I want to make it absolutely clear that funding follows the duty.

**Q1268 Ian Mearns:** I am very heartened to hear that, but if you are going to expect the constabulary to take part in that, we need to talk to the Home



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Office about their role within this partnership as well. I deal with my chief constable on a regular basis, because they do not have the resources to investigate crimes that we know have taken place—that is a problem. For them to go from investigating crime to dealing with non-attendance in schools is going to be a tough ask for some chief constables up and down the country. I really think that needs to be emphasised with the Home Secretary as well.

Secretary of State, during the Easter recess, we heard about an impending crisis in teacher supply—this is something I have been banging on about for quite a while—with many teachers seeking to leave the profession. How will you deal with that?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** A couple of things to say on that. First, teachers have gone above and beyond in delivery. I saw at first hand as we were going into omicron, and then as we came out of it, the work that they did in those first crucial weeks of testing children as we got back into education in January—they did an incredible job, as did support staff in schools. The emphasis in the White Paper on the half a million teacher training opportunities—be they the early career framework, initial teacher training, or later on in life in that professional development—is really important. Recruitment and retention are important, hence our commitment to the starting salary of £30,000, an uplift of, I think—

Q1269 **Ian Mearns:** Are you not concerned, however, about the attrition rate in the teaching profession at the moment?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I am always concerned about the profession; I am always concerned to make sure that I listen to the profession and that they are supported. They have done an incredible job, and I will always look to make sure that we continue to support the frontline in what they do.

Q1270 **Ian Mearns:** You intend to establish an institute of teaching. What was the thinking behind not involving higher education institutions in that institute of teaching?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** In terms of the tendering process?

**Ian Mearns:** Yes.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I think we had two bidders—

Q1271 **Ian Mearns:** They have been consulted, but it does not seem as if they are going to be involved in the actual delivery.

**Andrew McCully:** It was an open procurement, and we are still in the procurement stage for the institute. It was an open procurement for any organisation. We set a very high bar for quality because we want the institute of teaching to be a beacon for the whole of the profession, in terms of the quality of its initial teacher training, the quality of the delivery of the early career framework and the national professional qualifications, and the training and support for national leaders of education.

Q1272 **Ian Mearns:** I raised this with the new schools Minister, and he seemed



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to accept that there was a particular problem with this, in as much as several higher education institutions that deliver or have been delivering teacher training were thinking about walking away from the process. That is really rather damaging when we are trying to have a massive drive on recruitment and retention of teachers.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Yes, and I think Robin has been engaging heavily with higher education institutions to make sure that we get this right, and that people's concerns are listened to and we then act on them.

Q1273 **Ian Mearns:** The other thing that I would like to raise is that our predecessor Committee, of which I was a member—I have been a member, I am afraid to say, for 12 years—published a report on special educational needs in 2019. It has taken you three years to produce a Green Paper following on from that report. That report, if we may say so ourselves, was well received by the field and had many important recommendations. Why are we dealing with a Green Paper, as opposed to a White Paper, in building on the recommendations of that report?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** You will remember that I was children and families Minister in 2018. The work that we did on the reforms to SEND provision were really good quality. The implementation has been challenging—we have had covid in between, hence part of that delay. What I really wanted to do when we published the Green Paper was ensure that we engage with children and their families, because trust has broken down. We know that, and all of you know that from your constituency surgeries and post. How do we now rebuild that trust to ensure that parents feel that their child will get the support they need, whether that is mainstream, specialist or independent provision? That engagement—the Green Paper and the 13-week consultation—was the right thing to do, in my view.

We are moving rapidly. I did not wait for that either. I went to Rishi Sunak and said, "Look, I need money now." We got £1.1 billion, so the total budget is now £9.1 billion. If you look at the last three years, that has grown by 40%. We got £2.6 billion for more capacity for mainstream and specialist provision as well. We are not holding back on building capacity, because in order to regain trust, parents have to believe the capacity is there for their child. Part of that rebuilding of trust is consistency of offer and support across the country, not a postcode lottery. You are right that the delay was unfortunate, but between covid and then wanting to get this right, it was important to get it right and ensure that we deliver on that as quickly as we can.

Q1274 **Ian Mearns:** There is something that I am particularly concerned about. Going back many years, I was chair of the governors at what was then called a moderate learning difficulties special school. In my experience, one of the sad facts of life, because we did have fantastic engagement with parents, was that an enormous proportion of the youngsters had parents who had special educational needs themselves.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** We weren't recognised, though, at the time.

**Ian Mearns:** Yes, they probably weren't recognised. We need to do



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much more for the process of supporting those parents through helping their children go through the minefield—the redress systems. We need to have professional advocates who will work on behalf of those sorts of parents, who may not necessarily have the capacity to do it themselves effectively.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** You are absolutely right. I looked at this really carefully. The best way to do that is if every parent—no matter their background—knows that there is a consistent national SEND and AP system, hence why I want the Department to play a much bigger role in delivering that single national SEND and AP system, with consistent standards, so parents know what they get at the end of the day and what they should expect to get, because it is a national system. I want parents to feel that they can get that early intervention, so that means strengthening mediation. I also want them—the parent and the child—to be supported to express an informed preference for what is suitable for them. How can that be informed if there is no national standard? Hence why the Green Paper is so—

Q1275 **Ian Mearns:** But in order to do that effectively, Secretary of State, what you will need to do, I think, as a result of this Green Paper, is actually have a network of independent advocates who do not work for the local authority, because it is quite often the local authority that the parent is having a discussion or an argument with. We need that independent advocacy, which is supported by Government, to help those particular parents navigate the system.

**Chair:** We argued in our previous report for a neutral advocate.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I remember. I think that the best way to deal with it is for the Department to take a much bigger responsibility. You cannot have whatever adequacy you may have if there is inconsistency nationally. Until we have a national SEND and AP system that is consistent—with parents knowing, “This is what I should expect for my child”—we are still going around in the circles. It does not matter who and how good the advocate is; you are still getting a postcode lottery, weakening that trust relationship between a parent and the system, the delivery mechanism.

Q1276 **Chair:** It would work much better with a neutral advocate for parents. However good your new system will be, it will take time, and parents need that support. We are talking not about the parents who may be lobbying MPs to help them navigate the system, but about parents who have not lobbied their MPs and who are really struggling.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Chair, that is my point. Until parents know that there is a national system that is consistent and what their child is entitled to, and what they will get, whatever postcode they live in, you are not tackling the root cause of the problem. You will still get that inconsistency and postcode lottery, hearing that some parents in some areas have got this particular support—

**Chair:** It is not either/or, but both.



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**Nadhim Zahawi:** But you start with the Department being able to be comfortable to lean in and to carry risk, saying, “Here is what the national system needs to deliver for your child.”

Q1277 **Chair:** Absolutely. It is important to give parents the right to have a neutral advocate to help them navigate what will always be a complex system, so it is both, not an either/or.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** First, let us complete the Green Paper consultation, and we will come back and, at speed, move to a place where we can deliver this.

Q1278 **Chair:** Before I hand over to Kim, I was just mentioning the NUS and I have just been sent something by LBC—it has appeared literally in the past hour. LBC radio has revealed a recording of students attending a workshop, run at the National Union of Students by the Federation of Student Islamic Societies. At that conference, they were told not to report any individual they had genuine concerns had been watching extremist material to Prevent. Sir Mark Rowley, the former head of counter-terrorism, told the station that it is critical for people to report anyone drawn towards extremists to the authorities. How concerning is it that such views are being shared fairly openly at an NUS event?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Deeply concerning. I would like to look at the detail. That is very serious.

Q1279 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, Secretary of State. The White Paper proposes key stages 2 and 4 attainment targets by 2030, but it fails to acknowledge disadvantaged children. You talk about the foundations being right for children to learn, so how do children learn when they go to school with empty bellies? We know that child poverty has increased significantly in the past 12 years, but the National Education Union says that the White Paper fails to acknowledge the causes of poverty and other levels of inequality. Will you identify where in the paper those issues are looked at and dealt with?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Thank you, Kim. I would say to you that our obsession, our commitment and our focus in the Department is on disadvantage. Everything we do in the Department focuses on the most disadvantaged children in our communities and our society. Everything we propose in the White Paper will disproportionately help disadvantaged children, and rightly so. They are the ones who struggle when behaviour is bad in the classroom. They struggle the most, because they do not have that additional support.

There is the work we have done, as you have done in this Committee, on white, working-class boys and girls—and boys in particular are disproportionately impacted by low-quality education. Hence everything in this White Paper means that we will deliver for the most disadvantaged, whether it is with the £5 billion on recovery or the laser-like focus on making sure that every school is part of a high-performing and strong family of schools. Ultimately, it is those students who are most disadvantaged who will suffer the most if we do not deliver great



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education, with a great teacher in every classroom, everywhere in the country—at the right time and place for those children.

**Q1280 Kim Johnson:** Are there any particular sections in the proposed White Paper that touch on those specific issues?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** As I said, if you look at all the work done to gather evidence for the White Paper, it is about making sure that the system works for every child. If it works for every child, it means that those who are most disadvantaged will actually benefit the most because they are the ones who are disproportionately impacted by failing schools and behaviour.

**Q1281 Kim Johnson:** And by poverty.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** You are right. That is why our breakfast club investment is so important, as is the holiday activity food programme, which I was so proud to have launched with Frank Field and Ruth Smeeth all those years ago, with £10 million. I persuaded my then Secretary of State, Damian Hinds, to listen to Frank and Ruth and give me £10 million; it is now a £220 million per year programme. I got three years' worth of funding from Rishi Sunak. All that work is about making sure that we focus our efforts, energy and resources on the most disadvantaged, because they are the ones who struggle the most at a failing school.

**Q1282 Kim Johnson:** What does success look like, in terms of reaching those targets and improving life chances for those disadvantaged children?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Every child, whether they are in Knowsley or in Kensington—

**Kim Johnson:** I don't think you should talk about Knowsley, because Knowsley did not receive any funding for levelling up. They are not a good example, Minister.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I think it is a very good example, because with the levelling-up White Paper we did tremendous work looking at which areas need educational investment, and then educational investment-plus. Actually, the schools White Paper means that high-performing multi-academy trusts will be in Knowsley, delivering for those schools that need to turn around and continuing to improve life chances for those children.

I think talent is equally spread, so a child in Knowsley is as equally talented as a child in Kensington. Opportunity is not equally spread, and it is my determination to change that, through the work I will do with this White Paper. If I deliver on this—and I am confident that we will—and we have the Church of England, the Catholic Church and grammar schools all joining, then by 2030 we will have completed the journey and will have done something truly great for our country.

I have been blessed by having an extraordinary education; I am someone who is now Secretary of State for Education who could not speak a word of English when he got to these shores at the age of 11. That is my determination and my commitment to you.



**Q1283 Kim Johnson:** Thank you for your responses. The Chair has talked about anti-Jewish racism this morning. I would like to touch on anti-black racism. In the 1970s, disproportionately high numbers of black pupils were diagnosed as educationally subnormal and forced to attend special schools. A great number of those people are suffering significantly because of that. I want to know if you think it is right to acknowledge that wrong and provide an apology to those people who were diagnosed simply because they were black?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Of course it is right to acknowledge the wrong and to apologise if people were diagnosed wrongly. I think it is abhorrent that people were treated in that way. I would call it out any time I see it. It is unthinkable that people's lives were blighted in that way. I want the system to work where every school is a SEND school. I have seen great examples of delivery in mainstream schools, as well as in specialist schools. The point that you mention is truly horrific.

**Q1284 Kim Johnson:** Would you agree with me that the disproportionately higher numbers of black pupils who are sent to pupil referral units are similar to what happened in the 1970s—that more black children are being impacted because of their treatment by teachers, in terms of referrals to pupil referral units?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** This is where I think we have an opportunity. What do I mean by that? Let me illustrate with an example, which is the work that is done in Blackpool. In Blackpool, until the schools came together and decided collectively that they would collaborate and not exclude pupils, they at one stage had the second largest pupil referral unit, or AP, in Europe. Far too many pupils were being excluded—I think they had something like 245 children in that setting—but they came together and absolutely committed to collaborating and not excluding pupils, evidencing what good practice looks like.

The evidence is so important. The reason I have just re-endowed the Education Endowment Foundation is because evidence-led decision making is the right thing to do. They have now succeeded in bringing those numbers down to below 40 or 45, if I am not mistaken. That is the sort of thing that the White Paper addresses: the ability to collaborate between those high-performing families of schools in strong multi-academy trusts to deliver for every pupil, because AP should not be a place where you just put pupils and forget about them.

**Q1285 Kim Johnson:** But that does not distract from the fact that more black pupils are excluded on a permanent basis.

I just want to pick up on one last thing. In February, you issued guidance about political impartiality. Scenario C talks about teaching "particularly contentious and disputed" political issues, and you talk about the empire and imperialism. I just want to ask you how you think slavery, and the impact of slavery that still impacts so many black people, should be taught—the fact that Ministers' and ex-MPs' families have benefited because of the slave trade. How should that be taught in a balanced way, do you think?



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**Nadhim Zahawi:** We should learn everything about the abhorrent practice of the slave trade, as well as learn about everything else that the empire delivered.

**Kim Johnson:** Raped and pillaged.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Well, I can tell you from my own experience—we all fall back on our own experiences—that in Iraq, the British mandate left a civil service that was recognised as one of the best in the middle east. It was dismantled, sadly, by the Ba’athists under the despot Saddam Hussein—I am glad Ian is nodding his head on this. Children should learn about what this country did for the rest of the world, in terms of a civil service that worked to deliver for the people of a country like Iraq. Ever since then, it has gone backwards, sadly.

Q1286 **Kim Johnson:** But sadly, Minister, we are not taught about the 12 million enslaved Africans who were taken from Africa and sold, and that so many institutions still benefit from that today, unfortunately.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I think it is important that we learn all of that. I remember as a child watching the brilliant, incredibly moving, emotionally harrowing “Roots” programme, which I am sure many on this Committee will remember—Kunta Kinte was absolutely engrained in my mind—as to the horrors of the slave trade. We should learn about that, and I give you my commitment that we continue to make sure we support schools to be able to teach about the abhorrent trade in humans.

**Kim Johnson:** If we are talking about balance, that means looking at how black people were involved in their own emancipation and not white politicians. I end my questions there. Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Chair.

Q1287 **Caroline Ansell:** I wanted to ask about another commitment that sits within the White Paper, around multi-academy trusts and the desire to see all schools either being part of a multi-academy trust or with plans to be a part of one by 2030. I note that last year Ofsted talked about more evaluations being planned for this term, in order to get better insight into the role of multi-academy trusts. Clearly, the Department is moving further and faster than Ofsted and has made a determination that this is squarely the way forward and the way to increase quality and standards, so I am keen to learn more about that. Specifically, how will struggling schools be brought into those trusts?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Absolutely. Andrew is gagging to get in on this as well, and I will let him come in in a second. We now have a body of evidence—because we are about to announce the 10,000th academy—of what a high-performing, strong multi-academy trust looks like and what its attributes are, one of which is obviously financial strength and rigour, but the bulk of their work is around the ability to deliver a great education for children.

Q1288 **Caroline Ansell:** You say, “a body of evidence”. Is that around academisation or around the dynamic of a multi-academy trust? Those

are two different things entirely.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Correct. It is around what a strong multi-academy trust looks like and what the attributes are that make up a strong multi-academy trust.

Q1289 **Caroline Ansell:** And that is the body of evidence you say you already have or that Ofsted is looking for, as a result of wider and further inspections this term.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** We now know what strong multi-academy trusts look like. What we want to do is consult on the regulatory framework around that, because we moved under such speed under Michael Gove. When he came in, he accelerated the academisation process—rightly so, because we wanted to get scale—but when you move at such speed, sometimes you have to circle back and say, “Have we got the regulatory framework right?” Hence, I want to consult on that. The really strong leaderships in those strong multi-academy trusts have embraced this in my deliberations with them. They see this as the right thing to do, and then we will come back—

Q1290 **Caroline Ansell:** Do you have the body evidence that suggests that those strong multi-academy trusts are bringing in the struggling schools?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Absolutely—yes. Part of the work we are doing is to try and flex the system and focus the infrastructure of high-performing multi-academy trusts towards education investment areas and education investment areas plus. We think our initial focus has to be there because that is where we can get the greatest return and transform the lives of the greatest volume of children by giving them a great education. That is our focus in building that capacity. Andrew, do you want to come in?

**Andrew McCully:** I want to give a little background to what you are referring to in the Ofsted work. Their programme of trust summary evaluations is a way of going into a whole series of schools within the same trust, not just inspecting one school within the trust, but five, six or seven schools at the same time. They draw a set of findings and conclusions, both to help the trust itself and to point out things that the trust does really well or really badly, both for the benefit of the trust and for the benefit of the evaluation system.

That has been a growing role of Ofsted, and one that I think is really welcome. We have worked with Ofsted on this. It adds to the evidence base, but most importantly it is part of the school improvement efforts of the trusts themselves.

Q1291 **Caroline Ansell:** Why is it an evaluation and not an inspection?

**Andrew McCully:** As the Secretary of State said, we are going to undertake a full review of the regulatory framework for academies. The role of inspection needs to be part of that, but you have to start with the basis for the regulation, the definition of what a strong trust is, against which you can then draw conclusions. So, Ofsted and the role of inspection will definitely be part of that regulatory review. We will be working really



closely with Ofsted on that. But you have to have the review first, before you can make conclusions about the role of inspection.

**Q1292 Caroline Ansell:** In terms of that identity as a high-performing, strong multi-academy trust, you say you have the evidence that really reflects what that is. To come back to your families of schools, how do those trusts create that shared culture or those shared standards when they don't share a geography or other things, or have you seen that readily achieved?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** On the evidence around the strong leaderships in multi-academy trusts, I have seen both. I have seen ones that have focused very much on a particular geography and have done remarkable things because the ability to co-ordinate in a tighter geography clearly is easier. I have also seen ones that have actually gone—and we have encouraged them to go—further afield, but also deliver. And it's that evidence that I want to use to scale up capacity. Leadership is important. We know that. I know it's important in schools. It's also important in children's social care. We haven't talked about that, but I'm sure we're going to get to it—maybe later in this evidence session. The thing to do is to now work with our strong multi-academy trusts on what the regulatory framework looks like. We have tried, in the White Paper, to bring clarity of responsibilities in the system for different stakeholders. Where do local government sit in this? Where do they operate? How does the MAT co-ordination with local government work to deliver for every child?

**Q1293 Caroline Ansell:** On local government, you have introduced a restriction that is essentially that local government or the local county council, presumably, can form a multi-academy trust but only in those areas where there aren't other high-performing trusts. Is there any correlation, though, between high-performing county councils and high-performing trusts? Would you necessarily expect to find that the high-performing council sits in the area that doesn't have those high-performing trusts?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** The driver behind that is learning from the past. I tried to deliberately look—institutional memory is important sometimes—at where we went wrong in 2016, in terms of completing this journey. And part of that is the fairness argument—that is, if you are a high-performing local authority and you feel that you have delivered great outcomes, great education, in your area, why should we exclude you from this journey? Why don't you, if you want to, come and join us and set up a trust? You will be treated equally; there is no special treatment. We have to iron out any conflicts of interest. You can move forward and set up a trust, and we'll back you. Or, alternatively, you can choose to work with other high-performing multi-academy trusts. I am open-minded when it comes to how that ultimately will operate on the ground. I just don't believe that it's fair to exclude a high-performing local authority, who are delivering great outcomes for students, from this journey.

**Q1294 Caroline Ansell:** They would not be precluded even if there were to be high-performing trusts in their area?



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**Nadhim Zahawi:** I am open-minded on that. If they think they can do it well and they can set this up and there are no conflicts of interest, which we would need to work with them on to iron out, then we can do this.

Q1295 **Caroline Ansell:** May I ask one last question? You said that part of the merit of multi-academy trusts was the stronger financial footing. Is that something that is borne out through those evaluations, in terms of a per-pupil investment? I ask because one of the challenges put to me is that the multi-academy trust has just given rise to very highly paid chief executives who sit very distant from the entry-level teachers coming in on those starting salaries, and it's very hard then to see that leadership at that very local level. Are local schools missing out on creating and on responding to the needs of their local communities, because of these super-executive set-ups?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Obviously, my strong message to the whole sector is that people should be remunerated in a way that is fair. There is accountability in the system.

On financial strength, I have to praise Theo Agnew, who did some really good work. I was in the Department where he had to sort out some MATs that weren't behaving well and some that were financially in difficulty. In terms of financial performance, they are now in a very strong place. Covid has further demonstrated this. I have had some examples of schools who were hesitant, if I could put it that way, of going into the multi-academy trust structure, but they saw the support that schools in that structure received through the pandemic and have changed their minds. I have some in my constituency who have approached me to ask, "Who do you recommend that we should join? I think it is now the right time for us to join." They have seen the benefits of that additional support through the pandemic, which will continue to deliver for children post-pandemic.

**Andrew McCully:** We published alongside the White Paper the evidence base, as the Secretary of State has referred to. A key part of that was the growing body of evidence about how effective trusts deliver greater value. One of the real things we have been tracking over years is the extent to which what was a problem in some areas—deficits for schools—has been coming down, year on year. The biggest reductions have been through academy trusts. That says something very powerful for me about the increasing body of evidence of effective management within multi-academy trusts.

Q1296 **Chair:** Briefly, in a nutshell, you are saying, basically, that you want all schools to become academies.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** High performing.

Q1297 **Chair:** And you are taking them away from local authorities, but then you are saying to local authorities that they can run academies. What is the point of that? You are just going around in circles.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** No, I am saying local authorities can set up a trust.

Q1298 **Chair:** So what is the point of going through all that bureaucracy? I am



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very pro-academies, but this seems to me to just be going in a circle.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** No. As I mentioned earlier, they can set up a trust, but there can't be a conflict of interest. There has to be a proper, separate, independent trust that they set up and that will be able to run their local schools.

Q1299 **Chair:** They are still running it, so what is the difference?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I want them to join us. My motivation was the fairness argument. When Nicky Morgan was Secretary of State and launched her White Paper, you had county councillors and leaders saying, "But we run schools—why are we being excluded? Why are we not being included in this journey? We can do this well, as well." My motivation is to say, "Come and join us on this journey." What is really heartening is to see, whether it is the Church of England, the Catholic Church, Jewish schools, Muslim schools, grammar schools—all are joining us.

Q1300 **Chair:** How is a local authority running a school now different from one running a school as an academy trust?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Because we won't treat them any differently from how we treat any other trust. They are not going to get special status.

Q1301 **Chair:** In a nutshell, what are you doing to intervene in academy chains that are underperforming? How speedy will it be to turn those schools around and intervene? At the moment, it often takes up to two years.

**Andrew McCully:** It is not good enough at the moment. That is why the White Paper talked about new powers to intervene directly at the multi-academy trust level. That is really important.

Q1302 **Chair:** How long will it take and how will it be decided?

**Andrew McCully:** I referred earlier to the legislation, which I hope, subject to the Queen's Speech, will be with you—

Q1303 **Chair:** No, how long will it take to intervene and turn the school around—to get into a new academy chain, for example?

**Andrew McCully:** With the right capacity of the better trust for the school, which is why the Secretary of State is talking about the importance of building capacity, we can do that increasingly quickly. The records show the increasing performance of turning schools around.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** You have heard me talk about the new power to intervene if a school is double RI. I keep reinforcing the high-performing multi-academy structure.

Q1304 **Chair:** I am just asking how quick it will be. Rather than two years of ruining people's lives—

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Of course, once we have the legislation through, operationally we want to make it as swift as possible. Every month and year that a child is at an underperforming school—



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Q1305 **Chair:** How quick will it be? What is the soonest you will be able to change an academy chain, for example, or intervene in a school that is underperforming?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Let me come back to you. In terms of setting what we would expect the speed at which we can improve that—

Q1306 **Chair:** At the moment it is about two years. Is it going to be months?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** It should not take two years to do this.

Q1307 **Chair:** How long will it be?

**Andrew McCully:** The objective for an underperforming school is to do that within five to six months. There are some instances where there are all sorts of external factors, which are really frustrating for me and my team, because every month that goes by that you are not tackling the root causes that are damaging children's education is a problem. Part of the advantage of the proposals in the new legislation is being able to intervene much more quickly.

**Chair:** Anna, you have been waiting very patiently.

Q1308 **Anna Firth:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Secretary of State. I want to touch on three things, if I may: the discrepancy in the school day across the educational sector; return to attendance; and I have a question on alternative student finance, which students in Southend have written to me about.

I want to start with the discrepancy in the school day across the education sector. I welcome the fact that you have recognised in the White Paper that there is real unfairness baked into the education system at the moment, by virtue of the fact that over 50% of primary schools and over 60% of secondary schools are providing at least two weeks extra education to students, which the others are not getting.

There is real unfairness in the system, which needs to be addressed. I am delighted that you proposed to address it, but I have two questions. Why do we not make this a legal requirement so there can be no shadow of a doubt about the length of the school week? Secondly, why are you allowing schools to go right up to September '23? We saw the speed at which some schools were able to react and innovate in the pandemic. Over a weekend, some schools put the whole curriculum online. When we have this unfairness baked into the system, why on earth would we allow another 18 months to slip by?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Thank you, Anna. They are really good questions. On the timeline, it was really through consultation with our high-performing families of schools who are already delivering the 32.5 hours, who said, "Be careful, because some schools will have transport contracts, for example, that they cannot end in time for this year."

My expectation is that majority of those schools will get to the 32.5 hours this year, but the reason for allowing schools to go to September '23 is the operational challenge that some schools may face. I do not want to have



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had a date set and for schools to say, “Hold on a second: you’re asking me to break a contract that will be detrimental or costly, because of your deadline of this year.” But I expect the bulk to do it this year.

The good news, as you quite rightly set out, is that the majority of schools are already at 32.5 hours. The evidence we have from the July schools snapshot survey is that about 14% were not. That means that there are still thousands of schools that need to get there, and I am determined to make sure they get there.

On your point around legislation, I think it is much more appropriate, if I can put it that way, that through the Ofsted inspection lever we get those schools to 32.5 hours. If an inspector has concerns about the quality of education in that school, they will be able to look at whether they are delivering the minimum 32.5 hours. To your very good point, 20 minutes less teaching a day would mean two weeks lost in an academic year.

**Q1309 Anna Firth:** I have a couple of follow-ups on that. First, we know that the vast majority of schools are already doing this within their existing budgets. Secondly, we know that £7 billion has been allowed in the spring statement to enable schools to get there. It seems to me incredible that with that amount of money the rest cannot get there by this September.

Thirdly, on the Ofsted point, surely it would be more sensible for Ofsted to focus on what is being done within those 32.5 hours and not on the length of time. If we made that a simple legal requirement, Ofsted could deal with the detail, which to me is far more what its role should be about.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I completely agree with you. Already Ofsted looks at whether a school is delivering a broad and balanced curriculum, and effective use of time is very much a part of that. In my view, you will find that schools will move very quickly to 32.5 hours. I think it is only right and fair that we do this and do it well.

**Q1310 Anna Firth:** Thank you. I want to move on quickly to attendance; I will deal with this briefly, because the Chair has already dealt with it at length.

It is absolutely horrifying that attendance has slipped so much. In the academic year 2020-21, 1% of state school pupils were severely absent. It is now as high as 11%. We know from DFE estimates last March that you can strip out the covid-related absence and there were still 8% of pupils—600,000—absent. Those were non-covid-related absences.

I would say that this is hardly surprising, given the message put out by the last Secretary of State for Education. The message was that it was dangerous for children to go to school and that schools should be closed. That was leapt upon and backed up by the education unions. We are now in a different world.



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As Secretary of State, is there not a real role here for yourself to get the message out at a granular level that children must be back in school? I have heard you say it and I know you believe it, but how are you going to get that message down to grassroots level? Perhaps we need a national advertising campaign to get our children back into school.

Q1311 **Chair:** And a statement to Parliament by you or the Schools Minister about how you are going to solve this problem.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I absolutely hear what you say. One of the first things I did was to set up the attendance alliance when I took this job on. In defence of my predecessor, I suspect he was operationally instructed because of the pandemic to close schools down. In my view, that was a mistake, but I think he had very little choice or room for manoeuvre in that sense.

You are right that we need to focus on this issue. If you look at where we are on attendance, as of the end of March, yes, we had 99.9% of schools open, but there was only 88.6% attendance. In primary schools, and of children on free school meals, attendance was at only 91%. It was slightly higher for all primary schools—1% higher at 92%. In secondary, it is much worse than that. Attendance was at 83% for pupils on free school meals, and it was at 85% across all pupils in secondary schools.

You are right that we have had high levels of infection, but some of the non-attendance is nothing to do with covid. That is why I think it is such a priority for us to make sure we really focus on this. You will hear more from me on this as well, including in Parliament.

Q1312 **Anna Firth:** We need immediate, impactful messaging. This is not a money issue.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** That is absolutely right. Let me make one more point that I think it is really important for this Committee to bear in mind. When I visited Hammersmith Academy I met its brilliant head, Gary Kynaston. He has turned it into a high-performing school. I think he has almost 60% pupil premium students in his school. He does not allow the family or home circumstances to get in the way of being ambitious for every child in his school. Hammersmith Academy is now seen as a beacon in the area—parents punch the air when their child receives the letter saying that they have got a place. That aspirational value influences attendance, because in the morning parents feel that it is really important that their child gets up, puts on their smart suit and gets to the academy, because that school it is actually delivering for those children.

I also think that the pursuit of excellence will deal with this issue, because if you think that your child is at a failing school, what is your motivation for making sure they attend?

Q1313 **Anna Firth:** Absolutely; I completely agree with those sentiments, Secretary of State. I just want to ask about another issue that really concerns me and Southend-on-Sea City Council: the children we don't know about. The fact is that there has been this huge rise in the number



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of children who are home educated. It used to be considered that 66,000 children were home educated. According to the Children's Commissioner, that figure is now 124,000, and the Association of Directors of Children's Services estimates it to be 116,000.

I am very pleased to see, in paragraph 77 of the White Paper, the commitment to establishing a register for children not at school, but can we please put a timeline on that, preferably today? The head of Ofsted has observed that we cannot have another one of those horrendous cases, such as that of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes. We have to know where children are. We have to deal with these invisible children. Can we please put a timeline on when we will have such a register? Some 200 organisations took part in the consultation in February. Surely that is a good place to start for getting this sorted.

**Chair:** Further to Anna's question, how will you ensure that the register is truly comprehensive and captures the whereabouts of children not known to local authorities? Perhaps you could answer Anna's question first.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** With regard to the work that I am doing in the Department, our priorities are: skills, schools, families. I intend to publish an operational chart showing what timelines I will set for myself and my team on delivery on schools, family hubs and all that work.

In answer to the question about the register, the register is really important and we have to ensure that happens rapidly. The focus is on getting it out. We should also remember and celebrate really good-quality home schooling. Let us not turn this into, "Home schooling is bad; being at school is good." Let us not forget that.

Also, our work on family hubs is equally important, because it is those families and that massive overlap that need that additional support. We are rolling that out in half of English local authorities. We have in total, between my Department and DLUHC, half a billion pounds from Rishi Sunak to deliver on this. I have done the policy making, so on skills we have legislation in place, and we have some more to come on the LLE. But operationally I want to publish so that your Committee, and the world, can see what our targets are and our timelines for delivery against this. What I did on vaccines, because data transparency is my ally on this journey—

Q1314 **Anna Firth:** Can you share that target with us today, Secretary of State?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** To answer your question, I will absolutely come back and say to you when the register will be in place and how we will ensure that we capture every child.

Q1315 **Anna Firth:** Okay; I will not push that any further, because I want to put to you one final question. A group of Muslim students have written to me about the need for alternative student finance. In 2014, the Government announced that it would introduce a takaful-based funding structure to be offered alongside the more traditional student loans. Eight years on, the alternative funding system still does not exist, and a recent poll suggests that 4,000 Muslims per year choose not to go to university purely due to



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a lack of an alternative student finance structure. Can you perhaps take that away, Secretary of State, and tell us what the Department is doing to make good on that commitment that was made so many years ago?

**Chair:** In a nutshell, please.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** In a nutshell, I will take it away and write back to you. I will come back to you on it.

**Chair:** There is actually a lot of concern. I have had constituents contact me about this.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** And we've got to make sure we deliver on it.

**Chair:** So you will write to the Committee about it. That is great.

Q1316 **Tom Hunt:** Very quickly, I know there might be a desire from some on the left for our young people to be left with the impression that our country is some sort of racist hellhole. It is certainly not my view.

**Kim Johnson:** If you ask black people, they might tell you otherwise.

**Tom Hunt:** I am sorry, Kim; I am talking, actually. You have had plenty of time to ask your questions. I do think it is important that our young people are aware of everything about their history, but overall, I would like to get patriotism to be promoted unashamedly within our schools. Our goal should be for our young people to be proud to be British, and that, on the whole, we are a force for good. Is that also your view, Secretary of State?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Absolutely. In my view, this is the greatest country on Earth. It took a boy from Baghdad who could not speak a word of English and made him the Member of Parliament for the heart of England, for Stratford-upon-Avon, and Secretary of State for Education in Her Majesty's Government. What country in the world delivers that? I cannot think of many.

This is the greatest country in the world, and I think our values—British values—being taught in schools is incredibly important. It is heartening to see that on my visits to schools, they really make a big deal of this, turning whole walls into murals about our values.

You see us taking a leadership position on the illegal invasion of the Ukraine. Why? Because the Ukrainians—I visited the Ukraine in 2014 when I was on the Foreign Affairs Select Committee—aspire to representative democracy, to the rule of law, free speech, and all the things that make our country truly great.

Q1317 **Tom Hunt:** Fantastic. That is very reassuring, Secretary of State.

Quickly, on the topic of education improvement areas, Ipswich was an opportunity area. We are also going to be one of these priority improvement areas, and I am just trying to understand more fully how these are going to work. Is it going to be similar to the opportunity areas—an extension of that? What are the differences going to be



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between opportunity areas and improvement areas?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** That is a really good question, Tom. I was a big advocate of the opportunity area programme, because I was the Children and Families Minister, and when I got the job, my team showed me this project. The great thing about it was the local engagement: it is ground-up, identifying good, strong local leadership—not just political, but business leadership as well—working on a focused project to improve education in Ipswich, Hastings, Doncaster and elsewhere around the country.

I did not want to lose all that great work we have done, so I pitched it to Michael Gove to say, “Look at this incredible work we have done in the Department. How can we build on that?” What we are doing is taking the best of the evidence of what worked in the opportunity areas and embedding it in the education investment areas plus. That is essentially what we are going to do with, obviously, much greater focus on what worked in educational attainment.

Q1318 **Tom Hunt:** You know my views on special educational needs. In terms of Matt Hancock’s dyslexia Bill, I have discussed it with lots of different individuals in the sector and I know that some people have got some concerns about details in the Bill, but I am keen that we find a way of achieving the aims of the Bill. That might mean that some of the details need to be refined, but I am sure there is a way of the Department coming together with him to find a way of doing this.

I know some people have said, “We do not want to label young people as having dyslexia and dyspraxia or something like that when they do not have it”, but trust me, as someone who is dyslexic and dyspraxic, some people do have it. Actually, it was only when I was 12, when I found out that I had it, that things went right for me. I went from being a 12-year-old with the reading and writing age of an eight-year-old to ending up doing pretty well academically.

I know there are issues of cost, but I urge you—because there might be a few issues with the Bill as it stands—not to say, “Well, we can’t do anything”, and instead to work constructively to find a way to do something in that space, because I am sure that would be the best outcome for young people.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** One, you make a very powerful point on this. And one of the things that I think will be a real game-changer is the parent pledge in the schools White Paper. Why do I say that? It is because what we are pledging, through schools and through teachers, is to identify the gaps in English—in the ability to read, write and speak the language—and then to share that information with the parents.

Now, because that is a pledge we are making that really high-quality teachers and families of schools already deliver, I want it delivered everywhere. Part of that pledge will mean that teachers will be able, very quickly, to want tools to identify if a child is dyslexic or dyspraxic. So I

think there is a real opportunity for us, through the White Paper, to do this and do it well.

**Q1319 Tom Hunt:** Brilliant. There is a lot in the Green Paper—the SEND Green Paper, which I think was a good document and I am pleased there will be a consultation period—about new SEND specialists and SEND, which is part of it and which is good. New educational psychologists—good. But I also think it is important that we focus on ensuring that all teachers who aren't specialists have got a base level of understanding in SEND, because I still hear many teachers saying that when they got their teacher training they heard very little about SEND.

It is about ensuring that every teacher—specialist or not—has a certain level of understanding, so they can pick things up. Frankly, it is that general appreciation that not all our brains work in the same way and that not all young people process information in the same way, and just having that at the back of their mind whenever they are teaching.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I agree, which is why the focus on that support for a SENCo in schools is so important as part of the Green Paper, but also in post-16 education. I am passionate about this, because I visit some of the really great work—whether in mainstream or specialist schools. I went to a brilliant school; again, I think it was in Blackpool—Highfurlong School. These kids do tremendously well, but we want them to do well post-16 as well. So we have got training bursaries, each one of £15,000 tax-free, for the FE sector to specialise in SEND, as well. A lot of work is being done on this.

**Andrew McCully:** I will just add something, because it is absolutely to your point, Mr Hunt, about all teachers needing that foundation. That is why the thread of the core content that goes in the fundamental changes to the quality of initial teacher training and the early careers framework has, as one of its central points, how children learn.

**Q1320 Tom Hunt:** Fantastic. I will just move on quickly to my final points to do with skills. An update on the skills improvement plans would be good, because I know that there is a pilot stage, which I think is completed, and I heard maybe a month or so ago that there would be a next tranche, because in Norfolk and Suffolk we wanted to be a pilot for that, but we weren't a pilot for it.

The sooner that we can get involved with skills improvement plans, the better, so I was just wondering what—realistically—would be the timeline for Norfolk and Suffolk becoming a skills improvement plan area, so that we can go about enhancing skills

**Nadhim Zahawi:** We are moving ahead and Alex Burghart is totally focused on making sure that we learn very quickly what “good” looks like and then scale it across the country. But let me write to you as to when you should expect that next stage to be online.

**Q1321 Tom Hunt:** Because we had Lord Baker giving evidence to us about a month or so ago and he was supportive of skills improvement plans, in terms of the ability of local businesses to have a greater role in shaping



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the FE curriculum in their local area. Actually, he thinks we should go further and allow businesses a role in shaping pre-16 education, which I thought was quite a radical proposal. Is that something you would be open to?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** On Lord Baker's work with the UTC programme, I remember talking to him four years ago. It is probably fair to say that they were still going through their teething problems, but they are reaching maturity and are in a much better place. We discussed it earlier. I do think that the work we are doing to get every school in that high-performing multi-academy trust means that there is the ability for children to interact with skills, with the opportunity for an apprenticeship or a degree apprenticeship. I am interested in building those runways for people's careers to take off on. The runways do not need to all be in university; hence why bringing HE and FE much closer together is so important. The work in schools is equally important. I was berated by the Chair for the White Paper. I respectfully disagree. I think that by getting the infrastructure in place, you deliver on that promise for every child.

**Chair:** I would never berate a Secretary of State. It is a passionate debate on these issues.

Q1322 **Tom Hunt:** Final question from me. In many respects I can see Ipswich, a large town in East Anglia with significant pockets of deprivation, benefiting from levelling up and being part of the Government's levelling-up agenda. We can see that in terms of an educational improvement area in our schools, and that is positive, but it has been slightly disappointing. I see skills as crucial to levelling up. Not being a pilot for a skills improvement plan was a bit frustrating, and we did not get our institute of technology, either. I have spoken to the Department about it. There were some shortcomings with the bid, and we all want to learn from that locally.

I was wondering whether, realistically, in this Parliament there might be another opportunity for us to bid to get an institute of technology. There was a really exciting proposal. We have got BT, Adastral Park and the main research campus of BT just outside Ipswich. There is a freeport in Felixstowe. We have also got the huge Sizewell C skills agenda. If there were some shortcomings with our bid, let us go back to the drawing board and improve it. It would be great if we could get that bid back on the table, because it would be hugely beneficial for levelling up in Ipswich and East Anglia more widely.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I know that you will do that passionately. The whole bringing together of HE, FE and business and the institutes of technology and what we are looking to do, which we announced in the levelling-up White Paper around making sure that we recognise them through a process of rigour so that they become sustainable as institutions, will be equally important. I am a huge advocate for IoTs and I wish you every success. I can't as Secretary of State comment on any particular bid, but I am sure you will bid well.

**Tom Hunt:** Thank you, Secretary of State, for your very informative



answers to all my questions.

**Q1323 Miriam Cates:** I have a series of entirely unrelated questions. First, is it still your intention to push ahead with the secondary accountability measures this year? There have been concerns from heads about extensive absence—staff absence, pupil absence—and all sorts of disruption as a result of the pandemic. Do you consider there is a level playing field even in the third year to publish those measures?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** This question came up at the ASCL conference. I think data and transparency are important, but I also think words matter. What do I mean by that? I mean that we have to publish these numbers because it is right to publish them, but also to explain to parents. I know you were complimentary about how we put together the White Paper in terms of the language very much speaking to parents. It is to say this is not about finger pointing or saying, “Oh, look at this school doing so much better than the neighbouring school.” It’s about being able to say what we have learnt from these numbers in terms of that improvement journey. We know that there has been disruption this year and last year because of the pandemic. As long as you frame it in that way, I don’t think you should just hide the data. I feel uncomfortable with that. It is much better to publish, but to frame it in such a way to explain that this has been a challenging period. This is not about finger pointing. It is about learning how we put the resources, the support and improvement where we need it to go.

**Q1324 Miriam Cates:** I completely agree with that if, as you say, the narrative is put out there properly and understandably, taking into account the fact that grades have been inflated in the past few years for understandable reasons. The problem, however, is a matter of comparison, which will happen in the media and by parents, whether we like it or not. Some schools have had significantly fewer problems with attendance—just by luck—than others. It is that natural comparison, which will happen, that I think schools are worried about.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Which is why I made the promise to school and college leaders that I will be out there explaining that this is not a way to have that narrative out there, in the sense that this is not about finger pointing. We have been through a difficult period, but it is right to publish.

**Q1325 Miriam Cates:** Moving on to the national leader of education programme, which was very successful in helping talented and high-achieving headteachers help other schools. I understand that these NLEs have been de-designated, and that the criteria have changed. Now, to be an NLE, a head has to have presided over a school that has jumped two Ofsted grades in one go. Of course, we want the best people on the programme, but I think that that will have the effect of massively reducing the pool of headteachers available to do this, particularly as so many schools have not been inspected for a very long time—again, for understandable reasons—but therefore there has not even been the opportunity for heads to have achieved that. I wondered what the rationale behind that change is.



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**Nadhim Zahawi:** I have a couple of things to say on that, and I will bring Andrew in on this as well. First, my vision is that the Institute of Teaching will be the new provider. What we want to do is to focus on quality, so we want headteachers with a real track record of improving struggling schools. We try to make sure in these changes that we have consistent training in the most significant and up-to-date initiatives for you to be able to do that work. Andrew, do you want to add anything?

**Andrew McCully:** We had a review of NLEs conducted by great experts in the field—Leora Cruddas and Ian Bauckham, people who really knew what they were talking about—and they recommended the improvements and changes to the criteria. What we did was say—yes, you are right about that particular criteria, but also—if a headteacher has other evidence about their huge effective track record, we can take that into account and make exceptions. That is what we did in the last window of—

**Miriam Cates:** So it is not a hard-and-fast rule. With supporting evidence—

**Andrew McCully:** Precisely. We can make exceptions.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** If you have a particular case in your constituency, then bring it to us and I will take a look at it.

**Andrew McCully:** We have not got a window open at the moment but, exactly, for future windows we can certainly do that.

Q1326 **Miriam Cates:** Thank you. The teacher pay rise has obviously been very much welcomed by the sector, but again I know that heads are concerned about whether they will be fully funded. Given the increase in costs that schools face because of energy prices in particular, and other inflationary costs, the worry is that if the pay rises and the oncosts have to be funded out of existing budget, schools will have to lose staff at a time when children really need the classroom teacher.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** You know, because we have talked about it, that we are delivering 500,000 teacher training and development opportunities by 2024. In the White Paper, we tried to set out the delivery plan for the commitment to the £30,000 starting salary for teachers. If you look at that, that is a 16% uplift, and that will come into effect at the beginning of next year—the 2023-24 academic year.

The proposal for experienced teachers would see them receive a 3% award—I know that inflation is running above that—in the next academic year. That is the highest pay award in the past 15 years, but we have had low inflation over the past 15 years, so I recognise that as well. The other bit, around recruitment, is the levelling-up premium for specialist teachers: they will get up to £3,000 tax-free each year from 2022-23 to 2024-25.

Q1327 **Miriam Cates:** I appreciate that, but will the 3% for teachers on the main pay scale be funded in addition to the existing school budget? Or will schools have to find that 3%, plus the NI and existing costs? Will they



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have to find that from within their current budgets?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** We have got a good set—

**Andrew McCully:** The Secretary of State has made proposals to the School Teachers' Review Body—in fact, he is giving evidence next week to the pay review body. Those proposals are on the basis of the funds that have already been secured for schools within the spending review. It is funded through the core school's budget.

Q1328 **Miriam Cates:** Thank you. This is my final question. I welcome the political impartiality guidance that has been produced recently. Of course, political neutrality is incredibly important in schools. It is not just about teachers telling children how to vote; it has become much more complex than that with different political ideas that have come about. Political neutrality is important, but there are also wider safeguarding implications about introducing adult ideologies and ideas to children at an age before they are ready to cope with them.

Traditionally, schools have been part of our defence against radical and extreme ideologies. We must teach about tolerance and anti-bullying; we must make children aware of what is happening in the world in an age-appropriate way. However, there are safeguarding implications with talking about some of those ideas—even in a politically neutral way.

I am thinking in particular about the teaching of gender ideology to children who are 11 or 12 years old, often in RSE, PHSE or by outside organisations. You have prepubescent or pubescent children who do not have a settled idea of sexuality or gender—they are children in a discovery phase—who are being told by adults they trust that if they do not conform to certain gender norms then they may be the opposite sex, non-binary or they may need to go away and explore. They go away and look on the internet and engage with platforms such as Reddit, TikTok and Discord where they meet adults who tell them how to obtain testosterone, how to go down a route of surgery or how to present in a way in order to go down a route of transition. That is an enormous safeguarding risk because it leads to permanent changes. They are going back to school and telling it that they are trans. They are then being excluded from normal safeguarding procedures.

A recent YouGov survey said that 79% of teachers now say that there is at least one trans or non-binary kid in their school. A fifth of teachers said that they would not ordinarily tell parents if that child told them if they were trans. That is a huge safeguarding fail—cutting parents out from a decision that is really important to a child's life. A lot of those children are autistic, so they are latching on to ideas as to why they might be different.

As Hilary Cass has recently come out and said in her interim report, socially transitioning a child "is not a neutral act"—it has long-term consequences. It is natural for children to be questioning sexuality and gender—and all those kinds of things—at age 11 and 12. Do you think there are safeguarding implications to introducing those kinds of ideas to children in schools by trusted adults and what can we do about it?



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Beyond just guidance about how it should be taught, should we look at whether it should be taught at all?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Thank you for that; there is a lot there to unpack so let me try and unpack it quickly as I know the Chair is very mindful of the time. Political impartiality is anchored in legislation. I thought it was right to issue the guidelines on this because there is a broad consensus about the lack of clarity around what the legal duties in this area really mean. We have published really clear and comprehensive guidance that helps those working in schools to better understand the legal duties on political impartiality. The guidance is also clear that the legal duties on political impartiality do not limit the range of political issues and viewpoints school can and do teach. I make a point of accepting invitations from schools at election time for a hustings debate, as long as students are hearing from the blue, red, yellow and green teams, because I want teachers to teach students how to think, not what to think.

On your very good point around safeguarding and parental involvement, I think parents have to be front and centre of this—that is my message to the frontline. You have a duty to safeguard those children, and parents are very much part of that. As we have done with the clear and comprehensive guidance on political impartiality, it is incumbent on us as a Department, because I have the capacity, the people and the ability to bring in external advice. The Equality and Human Rights Commission wrote to ask if it could help with this, and I have invited it in. It is only right that we are able to publish guidance that is very clear around issues of gender and sex, so that those on the frontline have the ability always to put safeguarding front and centre of what they do for children in their care in school.

Q1329 **Miriam Cates:** I appreciate that; that is very reassuring. But I think there is a difference between how schools need to follow the law and safeguarding practices for a child who has expressed a wish to take on a trans identity, including parents and treating them with the utmost respect, and all the safeguarding that they deserve.

That's very important, but do we also need to look at the age appropriateness of introducing some of these ideas in school, even if they are done in an impartial way? Children are not adults—that goes without saying. They are not developmentally ready to process certain ideas, whether that is critical race theory or gender ideology. There are all sorts of ideas we would not dream of introducing to young children. Could this be one of them?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Hence, parents have to be front and centre of this. It is really important that parental engagement is front and centre. We are doing the work right now. I hope to be able to issue the guidance as soon as we have done the work. You raise an equally important issue around the online platforms, whether Reddit or Discord or others. Last night, we had the Online Safety Bill going through Parliament. Having a duty of care placed on those platforms is really important for the example that you gave; it is truly horrific that that can happen in terms of online abuse.



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**Q1330 Ian Mearns:** We had Andreas Schleicher from the OECD and Lord Baker with us a few weeks ago. I think I'm right in saying that Andreas Schleicher, from the OECD perspective, expressed concern that the balance of the curriculum was not quite right and that there were large parts of curriculum delivery that were inappropriate for the needs of some of our young people—the less academic youngsters.

We have this massive skills agenda. I know there is concentration on a knowledge-rich curriculum, but does that downplay in any way the importance of creativity or developing inquiring minds or inventiveness, the arts, music, drama, dance, craft, design and technology? Craft, design and technology is extremely thin on the ground now, which is kind of worrying, given the scale of the skills agenda that we face.

Lord Baker was kind enough to comment on something I've banged on about for years; that the 2004 Tomlinson review was a missed opportunity. I think he was absolutely right, by the way, even though it was under a Labour Government. How are we going to get that balance right, to ensure that the curriculum is appropriate, yes, for the needs of the academic youngsters who will progress to a university career, but also for the others who will not go to university, but will want to engage in a range of different skills to further their careers?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Absolutely. We touched on this earlier in the evidence session. When I talk to apprentices and ask them what their experience was at school—back to Robert's point earlier—the nugget that comes out is that teachers are obviously more confident talking about their own experience, which is going to university, and less confident talking about apprentices. So one of the things that we are doing is giving teachers the tools so that they are as confident of being able to talk about the world of skills as they are about other parts of the education system. I think the success of things like the degree apprenticeship, the new standards in apprenticeships, which I was responsible for in the Department under the coalition Government, and the aspirational value of T-levels will lead to an ecosystem that allows young people and their parents to see these things as equally aspirational paths for them to take.

**Q1331 Ian Mearns:** But within that, there are a few problems, Secretary of State—

**Nadhim Zahawi:** On things like music, art and so on, we have made the commitment in the schools White Paper that we will publish that strategy, to make sure that we continue our commitment to the creative industries as well.

**Q1332 Ian Mearns:** We want to help our youngsters to develop in the best way they possibly can, but there is also a duty on us, in an education system, to try not only to produce the next generation of doctors, engineers or whatever; it's also about trying to develop the next generation of well-rounded human beings. Lord Baker, in giving evidence to us, was, I think, honest enough to accept that there has been a problem in the education system since the introduction of bums-on-seats funding regimes, which he was the architect of in the 1988 Act. Because of that,



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youngsters now don't get access to enough impartial, independent information, education, advice and guidance about potential future careers and at an age-appropriate level as well. Quite often, that advice and guidance needs to be delivered before they actually start doing their GCSE courses.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I would like to see some of that delivered at primary school.

Q1333 **Ian Mearns:** Indeed. I have no problem with that at all. Having been a chair of a careers company years and years ago, I am entirely on board with that. But at the moment it is not happening—it isn't happening.

**Chair:** Can we have the answer in a nutshell, because I want to bring in Caroline Johnson, who hasn't spoken yet?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I am going to bring Andrew in.

**Andrew McCully:** In a nutshell, that is the commitment in the White Paper—a new primary programme for careers support.

Q1334 **Ian Mearns:** And then following into secondary? Because the thing is that what is happening on the ground now is not, frankly, cutting the mustard. We need to get it better. And if we are going to solve that skills shortage, we actually have to have youngsters getting access to that wide range of opportunity, as opposed to just being funnelled into a sixth form because of a bums-on-seats funding regime.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Also, we have an infrastructure, in the Department, that is spending £86 billion a year. To be able to flex that infrastructure, whether bottom up, through the local skills improvement plan, which Tom was asking about, or top down, through the unit for future skills—I have to be able to challenge our infrastructure to say, "Here's what the economy will need, in terms of skills, in the next 12 months, two years, five years and 10 years. How do we flex that infrastructure to deliver against that?" That is my pledge to you. It's April. We are shortly to deliver the first cut of data, because data and transparency is our ally on this journey.

**Chair:** I am going to bring in Caroline now, because she hasn't spoken yet.

Q1335 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Thank you, Chair. I have a few questions that are not necessarily related to each other. My first question is about Ukrainian refugees. The Government have done a lot to welcome them, and many of my constituents are doing much to welcome Ukrainian refugees into their home. That has been fantastic to see, although it is horrific that it would be necessary in the first place. Many of these refugees are children, Secretary of State. How will you ensure that these children, arriving, as you did, perhaps at a similar age and with little or no English, receive the best possible education within our system?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Absolutely. As a rule of thumb, about 35% to 40% of refugees arriving will be children—under the age of 18. We—I set this out very early on—set a team on this in the Department to make sure that we



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have the capacity for, in the first phase, at least 100,000 Ukrainian children in our education system. I engaged with local government—chief execs and directors of children’s services—and I am working with them to ensure that, whether through the reunification route or our Homes for Ukraine route, places are available, and that local government is able to do that and do it well. Some areas will have more capacity than others—London, for example, has more capacity than other parts of the country—but we have to make sure that local government can get those children to the school that is most appropriate for them as quickly as possible. We have a good track record: we did it with the Afghan resettlement programme; we have done it with the Hong Kong Chinese; and I am confident we will do this and do it well.

**Q1336 Dr Caroline Johnson:** Do you think you have adequate resources, in terms of translation, in the places where those children are living?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** We have. The Treasury made more resource available for the Homes for Ukraine programme. What is really heartening is that I set a challenge for the Oak Academy team—this is the curriculum content that we had to build during the pandemic—and they now have a facility and have translated all the content so it is subtitled in Ukrainian, so they can listen to the content in English but see Ukrainian subtitles. I wish I had had that when I was here in 1978.

**Chair:** Your English might not have been as good.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I don’t disagree. We are very confident; it is going to be challenging, but we are up for the challenge. We have had some fantastic people come forward from both further and higher education as well, and from schools, with independent schools coming forward with bursaries.

**Q1337 Dr Caroline Johnson:** Thank you; that is really good to know. The other question I wanted to ask you is about parents. You have talked about your parents having a good understanding of the value of education—I think that is how you put it earlier. Education in what parents do at home is as important as what happens in schools. I spent much of the Easter holidays doing Times Tables Rock Stars with my little boy; it is very exciting and slightly repetitive—good fun. What will you and your Department do to further engage parents, particularly in the early years of children’s education?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** That is really important. We did some excellent work, when Damian Hinds was Secretary of State and I was the Children and Families Minister, on the home learning environment and that sort of early intervention, giving parents the confidence to read with their child and use some of the technology to enhance that experience. Nothing replaces reading a good book with your child. I am very proud that, for the platinum jubilee, we are going to deliver for every primary school child in England a beautiful book celebrating Her Majesty’s reign. Some of those children do not have many—or any—books in their home, and I am making sure that every child will take one home with them.

**Chair:** That will please Mr Hunt in particular.



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**Ian Mearns:** It is also her birthday tomorrow, Secretary of State.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Yes, indeed. The work that Andrea Leadsom did on the first 1,001 days—that brain development—is embedded in our family hub work, which will launch with half a billion between us and DLUHC, and half with English local authorities. It will allow local authorities to bring some of their current infrastructure into this as well. I always repeat my story about visiting the Harlow family hub with you, Chair. It is really important work: we know that early intervention makes a huge difference in outcomes in later life.

**Andrew McCully:** Of course, your home learning environment is not just then; it continues, and further resources are secured for that.

**Q1338 Dr Caroline Johnson:** Thank you both. I want to ask about school sport. We know that sport is very important for teamworking and for health, and that children who do more sport do better in school in other regards as well. We know that it sets people up for good bone density, good heart health, less obesity, longer and healthier lifespans, and sport into adulthood. We also know that even sporty girls—girls who describe themselves as “sporty” at primary school—often become not-sporty girls in secondary school. The amount of compulsory sport in schools—a couple of hours a week or something—is not enough given how much benefit it has to the child. What is your Department doing to get girls better engaged in sports through those teenage years? What information do the Government have on why children are falling out of sport?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** That is really important. Will Quince has done some tremendous work in this area. It is not just about sport; the daily mile, I think, is really important, and I want to try to ensure that we really deliver on that. I think it is deliverable, as does Will, and we will make sure that happens. However, I also know that Will has been doing a lot of work across Government.

This was a challenge when I was Children and Families Minister, where too many girls end up doing far less sport in secondary school. Understanding the underlying reasons for that is equally important. It is cross-Government work to try to address it, but also to ensure that the funding is in place, between us, Health, and other Departments, to be able to continue the focus on sport.

**Q1339 Dr Caroline Johnson:** Some of the reasons that girls stay are issues relating to puberty, to appearance in front of boys, to periods, and so on. All of that needs addressing if we are to ensure that girls get proper exercise.

There is another question that I wanted to ask. Coming back to what Miriam said about the gender issues, I know from Minister Quince that you are going to produce some guidance on sports and uniform. It is important that we ensure that trans students receive all the love and care, that they are not bullied, and that they are well treated within schools, in the same way as every other student. However, Minister Quince described as a minefield, in our meeting with him, the issues in determining how you deal



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with issues when rights may be seen to collide by some. I was wondering if you were planning to similarly include in your guidance issues around accommodation and changing.

I was approached, as a member of this Committee, by some parents who were dissatisfied that their teenage daughters had been in a mixed boarding and day house in an independent school with other girls, but then a male student had been allowed to go into that school because he was trans. He had been provided with en suite accommodation in recognition of his needs for privacy, but the young ladies were required to walk along the corridor to their communal showers in towels. Many of them felt uncomfortable—but were bullied if they said so—about walking where boys were.

I am therefore asking you, do you think that males—male students, so teenage students and young adult students—should have access to areas in which school-aged teenage girls are in a state of undress or a potential state of undress? If not, will you be including that in your guidance?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** The simple answer is that the reason why we have engaged with the EHRC is that there are people who have the capacity and the expertise, so we will be looking at all of that. I think—going back to Miriam’s point—that safeguarding is really important in this area. You are also right to say that a trans student must be protected and dealt with in a way that is sensitive, appropriate and delivers all the protections that are right.

However, I also think that it is equally important that the frontline feel supported and informed as to how to deal with these particular situations—whether it be the one that you have just outlined, or in terms of changing rooms in schools. There are ways of doing that; you make accommodations. A trans person could go in and change before the girls use the changing rooms.

I want to try to get to the guidelines being really clear, because I think it is incumbent on us. We have the capacity and the capability to do this, and do it well, to allow the frontline to feel that they have the backing and the confidence of the Department to make those decisions, and make them confidently, by safeguarding the characteristics of minority students in their class, as well as the other children in their care.

**Dr Caroline Johnson:** Thank you. My final question is about school transport. You provide guidance on school transport and where it should be available. In rural areas, we are also keen on people having choice in where they go to school. The nearest school might be 5 miles away and the next nearest might be 8 miles away, but they may like to go to the one that is 8 miles away. Many of my constituents will travel 15 or more miles to go to school. How will you ensure that choice is protected within multi-academy trusts? How will you ensure that people are able to go to the school that they want to go to?

I can give you an example. In my constituency, in the village of Claypole,



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many students like to go to the grammar school in the nearby town of Grantham just outside my constituency, but they are not given transport if they do that. It then becomes about whether parents have the money to pay for the transport for their children to go to that school, rather than have the transport to go to the school that the council wants them to go to. I don't think that is right, Secretary of State.

If parents want to make the choice for their children to go to a school within a reasonable distance, they should be given that choice, or, at the very least, be given a voucher of some description for the cost that they would have had in transport towards the cost of going to that school slightly further away. Could I ask you to look at the detail of that and come back to me on it?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I will happily look at the detail. I have had similar families in my constituency. I will come back to you. The only thing I would say on that is, that is not an easy one for us to solve.

Q1340 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** The final point is about how we protect grammar schools within a MAT. Grammar schools in Lincolnshire are very popular with my constituents. How do you protect their ethos and their identity within a wider trust?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** We have been engaging with grammar schools on this. I hope to demonstrate, Queen's Speech pending, how I intend to do that and do it well. Many grammar schools are already in multi-academy trusts and have done incredibly well and I am confident that the ones that are not will feel confident enough to be able to go in while having those characteristics protected.

Q1341 **Chair:** In 2021, the difference in the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals and non-eligible pupils achieving 9 to 4 grades in English and Maths was 26%. That gap has been broadly the same since comparable data was first published in 2011. It is not because of covid. Why do you think that is?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I think that we have been on a journey. If you look at the high-performing MATs—I keep going back to this; if there is one theme, the thing I am underlining is high-performing, because not all multi-academy trusts are high-performing—they have delivered better outcomes for the most disadvantaged students. Where I want to get to now is to take that evidence and scale it and deal with the entrenched challenge in terms of that gap.

**Andrew McCully:** The disadvantage gap did close pre-pandemic—

Q1342 **Chair:** It is pre-covid, so we can't use covid as an excuse. So I am asking why.

**Andrew McCully:** It did close pre-pandemic, so there is some confidence about the actions that have been put in place.

Q1343 **Chair:** It has been stalling since 2017. I gave you the figures. I am just asking why.



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**Nadhim Zahawi:** What Andrew is saying is that it began to move and close and has then gone backwards again. That is the problem. We know what the ingredients are to get it to close. I am confident. If I can deliver this White Paper, we will absolutely make a big dent in that gap, if not close it completely.

Q1344 **Chair:** Given your passion—you have said that you want skills—will the Bill, when it is published, mention a skills-rich curriculum alongside a knowledge-rich curriculum?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** See, this is where I keep going back. It is the families of schools that deliver—

Q1345 **Chair:** Why mention knowledge, then? They deliver that as well. Why is it just one side of the equation and not the other? Both are important; it is just a see-saw.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I think that focusing on the word does not mean—

Q1346 **Chair:** It is all over the White Paper. It is all over every single statement that you put out as Secretary of State. They always say—the press statement or whatever it is—a “knowledge-rich curriculum”. I am not against it—it is very good. It should say a knowledge-rich and a skills-rich curriculum, and not just post-16.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I will absolutely look at your challenge, but I go back and say—I am confident in what I am saying to you—that the infrastructure that I want to deliver will deliver that rounded student who is equally comfortable with skills and team-building—

Q1347 **Chair:** And yet it is not mentioned. It is always knowledge-rich.

**Ian Mearns:** It is about mood music, Secretary of State.

**Chair:** I believe you are passionate about it, but I just believe that the arch traditionalists—the Sparrows from “Game of Thrones”—when they see the word “skills”, they go, “Absolutely not; not for pre-16, only post-16.” I think that your releases, your statements and the Bill should say knowledge-rich curriculum, which is fine, but a skills-rich curriculum as well.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Which is what we will deliver.

**Chair:** It should be in writing.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I hear you.

**Chair:** You always say that you are data-driven.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I am.

**Chair:** Anyway, thank you very much. You have been really informative today. Even given my opening remarks, I recognise that the Department has done some really tough things, but I just think that they should set the example; if teachers and support staff are being required to and are doing everything they can to help our kids, staff should be in the



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Department as well.

Thank you so much to you both.