



Education Committee

Oral evidence: Left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, HC 279

Tuesday 17 November 2020

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 17 November 2020.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Jonathan Gullis; Tom Hunt; Kim Johnson; David Johnston; Ian Mearns; David Simmonds; Christian Wakeford.

Questions 157 - 203

Witnesses

[I](#): Claire-Marie Cuthbert, CEO, Evolve Academy Trust; Nick Hurn OBE, Chief Executive Officer, Bishop Wilkinson Catholic Education Trust; Clementine Stewart, Local Governing Body Vice-Chair of Governors, Langford Primary School; Helena Mills CBE, Chief Executive Officer, BMAT Education; Andrew Smith, Chief Executive Officer, Learning Pathways Academy Trust; and Ruth Robinson, Executive Head Teacher, Swindon Academy.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Claire-Marie Cuthbert, Nick Hurn OBE, Clementine Stewart, Helena Mills CBE, Andrew Smith and Ruth Robinson.

Q157 **Chair:** Good morning, everyone, and welcome to our panel, slightly later than planned. Just for the benefit of the tape and for those watching on the internet, could I ask you to introduce yourselves, your school and your titles? If I can start with you, Clementine.

Clementine Stewart: Good morning, everybody. My name is Clemmie Stewart. I am a head teacher of two schools in London, but I am submitting evidence today as the Vice-Chair of Governors at Langford Primary and Wilberforce Primary.

Chair: Which are part of the United Learning Trust.

Clementine Stewart: That is correct, yes.

Chair: Thank you. If you are not happy with first names, please let me know. Andrew.

Andrew Smith: Yes, I am more than happy with first names, thanks, Robert. I am the head teacher at Lyons Hall Primary School, the CEO of Learning Pathways Academy Trust and I am also the executive head teacher at Whitehall Academy, Braiswick Primary School and Tendring Primary in Essex.

Claire-Marie Cuthbert: Good morning, everybody. My name is Claire-Marie Cuthbert. I am the CEO of the Evolve Trust, consisting of primary, secondary and special schools in Mansfield.

Chair: Thank you. Do you like to be addressed as Claire-Marie or just Claire?

Claire-Marie Cuthbert: Claire is fine.

Ruth Robinson: Yes, good morning, everyone. I am Ruth Robinson, the executive principal of Swindon Academy and Nova Hreod Academy in Swindon. Both schools are part of the United Learning Trust.

Helena Mills: Hello, I am the CEO of BMAT Education, which is a mixed MAT of primary and secondary based in Essex and East London.

Nick Hurn: Hi, my name is Nick Hurn. I am the CEO of the Bishop Wilkinson Catholic Education Trust in the north-east of England. It is a mixture of secondary and primary schools. At the moment we are about 20 and we are expanding to 48 by 2022.

Q158 **Chair:** Thank you. I should formally, now we are live, declare an interest in the sense that I know Helena Mills very well as super head of Burnt Mill Academy Trust in my constituency and across Essex.

We are going to divide this section into four parts and ideally have 20



HOUSE OF COMMONS

minutes each and members will intervene. I want to start off with the why. Why is that white working-class boys and girls are behind many other ethnic groups and their better-off peers in the way that they are; looking at whether free school meal eligibility is used as the right measure and whether there are other measures that you think would be useful to capture; also current support mechanisms for white disadvantaged pupils to support those who may not meet FSM eligibility criteria, but who do face other kinds of disadvantage. We are going to discuss that for the next 20 minutes or so and finish just before 10.40 am. Who would like to go first? Nick has his hand up.

Nick Hurn: Why do white disadvantaged children not achieve as much as other ethnic groups? In my particular area, and I have worked in this area for 20 years, it is predominantly white disadvantaged children. The difference I think from other areas is it is an engrained attitude by many of the families over generations. They have a disregard for education in many respects. There is also a large proportion of the families who struggle to help their children, certainly in preschool education areas in particular. That is the real main challenge.

A lot of our children do not come to school with developed language skills, so before they even start they are behind other children. That does not get any better and we struggle along and struggle along. They get through primary school, then they get to secondary school and by the time they are at secondary school it is far too late. There is a poverty of aspiration in the area. There are very few good role models and few opportunities for development in industry and commerce. You look at London and big cities, I think children down there can look around and see many excellent examples of what to aspire to. In our particular area, there are far fewer opportunities to develop those sorts of ideas of what they might want to do.

I will give one anecdote. We took a group of children on a field trip a couple of years ago and one of the staff reported to me that two of the year 10 students had not been off the estate their whole life. They were only travelling to Newcastle for a day trip. I thought that was absolutely systematic of the problems that we face in the white disadvantaged areas.

Ruth Robinson: The first half of my career I was privileged to work in Birmingham and worked in schools with large proportions of children from different ethnic minority groups, disadvantaged pupils. Then in the second half of my career, for the past 14 years I have been working in schools that are predominantly white disadvantaged communities. One of the things I would add to what Nick has said is that in comparison to children from different ethnic minority groups, sometimes our families lack the support of those extended family structures and the sense of community and religion. The mosque, the church and the gurdwara enrich the lives of children from different groups. We do not find that within our white working class communities.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

If you add to that the impact of poverty and poor diet on children's health, it means that alongside the lack of aspiration there are other deeply entrenched problems within our communities that mean the children are not surrounded by a family with high aspirations or ambition for them. As I say, unemployment and poverty has a great impact on their lives as well.

Helena Mills: I agree with what others have said, in particular about parents. Having been in education for nearly 30 years, with the white disadvantaged always being a challenge and underperforming, I feel that we probably need to stop tweaking with the education and have a major overhaul and begin to think about what our vision is for all our children in England. My feeling, as an all-through organisation, is that we see parents very hopeful, very engaged, children leaving the primary sector doing particularly well, feeling that they can achieve anything, then by the time they get to the age of 14 and 15, they are becoming very disaffected and their parents have given up hope.

I think it is because we still have not resolved this pathway properly in the country between those children who want to go off and follow an academic route post-16 and those children whose interests and skills lie in a more vocational route. The exam system does not help because the exam system is set up for some people to fail. We have national averages, which mean that some are going to have to be below average. For your disadvantaged children, who are often underconfident anyway, that enhances their disaffection and their lack of aspiration. I feel that we need to start thinking about what the education system is trying to deliver.

Clementine Stewart: I completely agree with what everybody else has said, but one thing I would also bring everyone's attention to is the fact that many of these children are starting school at four and five already with that gap having developed because of language acquisition and communication skills. The problem is that there is a beautiful time of those first five years of a child's life. They then come to school and if they have not had that language-rich environment, the support from home, the ability to support from home—I am not saying it is sometimes about the effort or the drive, but the ability to support and develop language structures—these children are starting already at a disadvantage to their peers. There are some good free services up to five that then stop at five, so you need to get that early intervention in as soon as you possibly can. Supporting parents' knowledge of how to do that is very important.

Andrew Smith: I agree with everything that everybody has said, particularly what Helena and Clementine were saying about the early language acquisition. I would also bring in parental priorities. If your priority is food, if your priority is housing, then education is pretty further down the list. Also, what Nick was talking about: parental experience of school themselves and that negativity, aspirations linked to unemployment and place. When you look at the place, and I think about



Clacton, people's biggest aspiration is to move out of that area. Once you get those skills and you get those qualifications, you leave the area. The cultural capital experiences that those children have, again attendance linked to the value placed on school and health issues. In those communities, there tends to be a little bit of trauma and things that families have to cope with. Again, the impact of that on children is immeasurable.

Q159 Christian Wakeford: I had a taste of it myself when we were in lockdown of trying to do home schooling with a two year-old, to a point where she even unplugged the router in the middle of a Select Committee meeting, which was fun. I have a lot of respect for all those do it, but I understand the frustrations, the difficulties and everything else involved with dealing with toddlers.

It sounds like the majority of you are saying it is a poor starting point at the start of the educational career that just isn't caught up. It seems all the intervention is thrown in at the last minute when you are 15 or 16 just to get you over the finish line, to barely get a pass. What would your thoughts be in regards to bringing that intervention much earlier, into early years and making sure that we are tackling some of these issues, whether it is the language skills, the numeracy skills—granted, very subtle nudges—but at a much earlier point, as opposed to trying throw all the resource in when it is far too late?

Chair: Clementine, you were very clear about this early intervention in your evidence you sent to the Committee. Do you want to elaborate on that, please?

Clementine Stewart: Sure. At Langford Primary we have a nursery. Whenever the children join the nursery they all have screening in speech and language, so we are straight away able to identify any challenges. I think there is some work to be done in terms of upskilling nursery key workers to be able to do that too. The key message here is the earlier you do it, the better. There is also some work to do around healthcare and making sure that the healthcare system is also best prepared in supporting children with those early milestones and identifying as soon as there is an issue, being able to intervene and get that support, because you are absolutely right, the earlier it happens the better. Schools can do so much but each time you are waiting a little bit later, whereas if the healthcare system could be involved as well that would also help.

Nick Hurn: I think back to the Sure Start programme. I know it was maligned by some folk, but my wife worked on a Sure Start programme in very deprived areas of Sunderland. She said it was very good programme. The problem was that they could not engage with parents that they needed to. This is always the problem. We need to have some sort of system of engaging the parents in the early period of any child's life to ensure that they can develop these language skills. It is training the parents as much as training the children, that is the key. It is always the elephant in the room that is sidestepped because as much as we



want to help in schools, if there is no parental support or interest, then our work is limited in what we can do.

Q160 David Simmonds: Some very interesting presentations from all the witnesses. I have two questions. The first slightly picks up on what Clementine was saying. One of my ideas that I am thinking about at the moment is that we maybe need a kind of national enrichment programme for young people, because there are certain things that clearly schools and teachers in early-year settings identify as being triggers for raising people's aspirations. That can be, if you are growing up in a rural area, visiting a city, or if you have grown up in a city, visiting a rural area or going abroad, the opportunity to do different things. It can be accessing different kinds of sport or getting work experience. I am interested in your views about whether we need a national enrichment programme that makes sure that every child has access to those types of opportunities that we know middle-class kids tend to get access to easily. If so, who should run it and how should it be structured? That was the first question.

The second question is about evidence of the success or otherwise of the different interventions. I suppose one of the challenges with the present framework is that we measure the success of institutions. A school can achieve success by getting a child over the line with their GCSEs and that is fantastic. A school can also achieve success by having a rigid uniform policy and managing out a child so they never appear on the school's figures anyway. From the institutions' point of view, both of those things look like a big success, but from the child's point of view they are hugely different. How do you think we should measure the success of interventions at the level of the child, for whom we are there to be the champions, rather than the institution, which is part of the system that is intended to serve the interests of all the children?

Helena Mills: I wanted to raise this point, because I think rather than measuring, as you say, the institution, it should be about looking at the destination. This summer, for example, a positive that has come out of Covid is that in schools where they submitted centre-assessed grades for GCSE levels and they did it right and they moderated it based on the evidence, the pathways for those children were probably the clearest they have been. I feel, from our organisation, that children who had the academic qualifications, skills and desire to follow that route went on to do A-Levels or to university and those children who needed the literacy and numeracy skills to access their vocational courses were able to do that. But that is never measured. We are measured by those not in education, employment or training and are not measured by whether those destinations are right for those children post-16. I think that is something that could probably change quite simply and would make the school accountable for ensuring that the children are on the right programme post-16.

Q161 Tom Hunt: In terms of Nick's point about Sure Start and the issue of engagement, there has been quite a lot about family hubs recently.



Certainly in the area that I represent, family hubs are taking over from children's centres and they are being supported via the Children's Commissioner. One of the reasons for that is there is an argument to say that they would be better at reaching out with the harder to reach families to make sure there is better engagement and a whole family approach. What are your thoughts about family hubs?

Claire-Marie Cuthbert: I wanted to come back to David's point around enrichment. I think it is fundamentally very important, that our children need to have the cultural capital, certainly in disadvantaged areas, which I currently serve. If you want children to be able to write about something, they need to be able to have a frame of reference to be able to do that. There is scope for schools to be able to offer enrichment or enriching experiences for children as part of the curriculum. I certainly would not—

Q162 **Chair:** What does it mean in practice? If you are going to offer enrichment to children, what does that mean if you are a child going into a school?

Claire-Marie Cuthbert: What we have done is we have looked at fundamental entitlements of what we believe every child should have in each year group. For example, it might be in my special school, for example, because a lot of those children are bused in, they do not have the experience of having a sleepover, so we provide that sleepover within school. They also have the opportunity to do stargazing parties on the field, to go to the theatre, to go to music, to visit the seaside. We are in the middle of the country. SATs papers talk about writing about the seaside, but they have never been there. They do not know what that is like. That fundamental nature of enrichment has to be centre to the school curriculum. I do not think it is an add-on, it needs to be woven in.

Q163 **Chair:** On the family hubs that Tom asked about, does anyone want to comment on family hubs? Clementine.

Clementine Stewart: I am happy to talk to that. Previous to working here, I used to work in a school that served the forces community down in Aldershot. A lot of the support that those parents needed came from those sorts of family hubs and centres, albeit it had a Sure Start theme to it previously, but where you could have a one-stop shop for all sorts of different services. You might have a medical one-stop shop; you might have support with childcare; you might have just a team of other mums around, with dads out on service. That is a far less threatening way of getting family engagement and support that does not feel like an intervention but just feels like a growing sense of community, working together towards reaching those children's aspirations. I think that would be a very positive move, definitely.

Ruth Robinson: I would like to pick up on the enrichment question. Claire talked about entitlement. At United Learning we have a pupil charter that gives a list of entitlements for every pupil, so we make sure



they hear great visiting speakers, they get to charity events, residential and take part in performances. We try to make sure, over their lifetime in school, that they have access to the sort of experiences that other, middle-class children should have.

Q164 **Chair:** Is there data to show that this works, that this does make a difference?

Ruth Robinson: In my school we suspend the curriculum for a week at Swindon Academy in July. Year 8, we take 180 pupils camping and we go down to Hastings to do that. We get our year 10s into local businesses. Our year 8s are doing charity work. Our Progress 8 figures for 2019 for our disadvantaged pupils were 0.36, so well above average. We do not know if it is correlation causation, but we believe that those enriching opportunities mean that children look forward to school and that they have that background that means that they can aspire high when they reach GCSE years.

Chair: There are a lot of you on the call, so keep putting your hands up so I can see you all so I know you want to speak. Jonathan.

Q165 **Jonathan Gullis:** I think this idea of repairing a relationship particularly with white working-class disadvantaged parents in the school system is absolutely important because of the poor experience of parents and grandparents. My own father went to Trowbridge, and a school there that had no interest in academics, and ended up going back and being a cleaner at the school during the daytime in order to then do night school and further propel himself. He was lucky to escape and moved areas, but that has led to Trowbridge being an area that is kind of left behind. If I look at Stoke-on-Trent, that is very similar. Those enrichment activities, I know that the Challenger Trust—which I believe do stuff in Gateshead, which is obviously in Ian's patch, and Bedford and Birmingham—is a very good private enterprise-led example of creating enrichment opportunities.

The key thing to discuss as well is that the school building is a massive community asset, yet it is one of the most underutilised buildings in that community. I had the privilege of going through a private school education. One of the things that happened was all the extracurricular clubs, not necessarily put on by schools but by outside agencies at the end of the school day come into the school building. Do you think there is something we can do to help make that school a much better asset but also enable local groups to come in and obviously do that enrichment activity that is so important?

Helena Mills: I want to address a few of the comments that were being made and some of the questions asked, in particular about the enrichment and then that final point. First of all, there is probably not a school in the country in primary or secondary that does not have a very full enrichment programme that is targeted at the disadvantaged. I think that has been happening for years, partly because of pupil premium funding but also because it is now part of the Ofsted framework, so that when you are looking at a curriculum, you would expect to look at that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

wider curriculum offer. I am not convinced that we need a national enrichment programme, because I think schools are brilliant at providing enriching opportunities for their children, including the most disadvantaged.

We struggle financially. Somebody asked how you could help. More resource. The pupil premium fund is very welcome but we probably spend triple that amount on each disadvantaged child just to give them some of enrichment opportunities in our organisation at primary and secondary. That question about using the resource, again I feel that probably there is not a school in the country that is not using the resources beyond the traditional school day. They do offer a range of sport and get the community involved in using the building, but again that is a financial resource because often it costs you more to run those activities than any income that you might generate, for example, by using an external provider.

We are probably going to mention it when we talk about Covid—we were talking about this before the meeting started—but the digital divide is huge between the advantaged and disadvantaged. I think we tried to tackle it maybe about 10, 15 years ago. We have tried to tackle it a little bit during Covid, but I think that would be a very easy win. It is not just about the online learning now during Covid, it is what having a great broadband service brings to your family and therefore your parents as well as your children.

Q166 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel. The Chair started the discussion this morning by asking why white working-class pupils were disadvantaged and left behind and you have all mentioned poverty, health inequalities, lack of aspiration, lack of involvement from parents, but all of those things could apply to other ethnic groups. I have not heard anything that is definitive that gives a reason why white working-class are in this position.

Claire-Marie Cuthbert: I was just going to piggyback on Helena's comments. We were talking about this before we went live, that across my multi-academy trust we have almost a third of our parents that do not have access to broadband, so in terms of the digital divide, Covid has widened that. We were very grateful for the laptops that the Government provided us. However, we had an issue with them being able to be utilised properly by our families.

There are also issues around the digital divide for parents, so even though we were able to provide laptops and devices, very often the parents did not have the skills and the knowledge to be able to put the appropriate parameters in place around the use of this technology. Covid has enhanced the digital divide, especially for those that are disadvantaged.

Nick Hurn: To pick up on what Jonathan was saying about the Challenger Trust, we are the schools that use Challenger Trust with



HOUSE OF COMMONS

regards to the enrichment programme. That is an incredibly important programme that does help. I talked about the child who had never left the estate. These sorts of enrichment programme allow those horizons to be broadened and enhanced.

Mentioning what Helena was talking about as well with regards the laptops and digital divide, that is also a huge problem. We talked about that just before we came online. It is widening the gap, without a doubt.

Back to Kim's point, what is the difference, the difference is these communities, white working-class areas, have been left behind. There has been a lack of focus on them. They are in engrained situations with regards families. We have talked about generations of families that have not engaged in education and do not see education as a particular area of interest. We talked about the ethnic minority groups that have strong family connections, I think that was a point made by Ruth. That is a very good point.

Chair: We are going to move on to the second section in a minute, but I just want to bring in Andrew and Clementine particularly on Kim's point.

Andrew Smith: I wanted to speak about Jonathan's point.

Chair: Speak on Jonathan's point, but can you try to refer to Kim's question as well, please?

Andrew Smith: In terms of enrichment and extracurricular, I think a lot of that depends on where a school is in its journey. A lot of the schools that are in these areas that serve these communities need a lot of support and a lot of help. To find people who are able to do that enrichment, to find people who can do that extracurricular, that is another challenge when you are also trying to address the issues around Ofsted and results and those kind of things as well.

Clementine Stewart: On Kim's point, in the school I worked at previously that I mentioned, we had 26 different nationalities that we taught there. The biggest difference I found between all of those other different nationalities and our white British families who were on free school meals was the importance and value placed on education and therefore the support that was given at home. In terms of old money, they would make three or four sub-levels over a very short period of time, whereas our white British children just would not move. It is because the parents were giving that narrative of, "This is important. This is an incredible opportunity for you to be in this school. You need to be working on this at home as well". They engaged in school, they came to parents' evenings, they supported everything that they could and that drive and that passion for education I just did not see in all of my white British families. Not all, by any means, but there was certainly a big difference there for me culturally.

Chair: I am going to move on to the second section and bring in Ian Mearns, who is going to lead that. Thank you.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q167 **Ian Mearns:** I will make an observation. I chair a primary school in central Gateshead where the school population has changed dramatically over the last 20 years and levels of parental engagement in the school are much, much greater now than they were 20 years ago. That is because of the ethnic mix of the school community. It is predominantly the pupils with parents who are from a black and minority ethnic community who are the ones who engage. That does not mean to say that white working-class parents do not engage, but they do not engage to the same level. That is just an observation, Chair, if you do not mind.

In terms of resourcing, resources for youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds can weigh heavily on reliance on the pupil premium grant, which is a key mechanism for helping schools raise the attainment of those pupils. How effectively is this funding reaching those schools and pupils who most need it? Who would like to come in first? Claire.

Claire-Marie Cuthbert: First of all, I would like to say that the pupil premium grant in my trust is massively welcome. We are accountable for that spend. However, that being said, there is another layer of children and these have risen to the top during Covid. There is a horrible phrase that we use to describe them, as JAM children, so they are Just About Managing kids. The ones that we have struggled with over Covid and have had to provide food parcels, clothes and things like that to are the parents that are on zero-hours contracts.

These are parents that will be working and they have very often not claimed benefits in their life before. During Covid the business may have finished, but they are not entitled to furlough because they were on zero-hours contracts. Also the issue of if they needed to self-isolate, so they were not entitled to benefits or anything like that, is a real genuine problem in my trust.

Ian Mearns: Just to let people know, I have Jonathan, I have Tom, so you can put your hands down. Who else would like to come in from the witnesses, please? Helena, please.

Helena Mills: I mentioned earlier about how welcome the pupil premium grant is, but it needs to be more. I also welcomed the change from the Department for Education, where rather than just looking at your annual spend, there was a move to get schools to think about the strategy over a long term. I think it is about Kim's point about how long people have been talking about the white poor and my point about just tweaking, some of these things take a long time. I think the message you have heard—and you have probably heard from other witnesses in the past—it is about parental engagement and parental confidence to support their children. If you are trying to tackle that, it takes a long time and so annual reporting of your pupil premium spend is not particularly helpful, I do not think.

The issue is that leaders in schools need to be given the time to think. They are going to get this sum of money. They need to know how long



they are getting it for, for five years, if that is possible—I am not a Chancellor of the Exchequer, so I do not know anything like that—so that you can plan strategically, because it takes years to tackle the disadvantage that these children face.

I also would like to talk about Claire's point. We do not call them JAM children, but the working poor. We must not underestimate that there are huge numbers in the communities that we serve who are working, who are not entitled to additional pupil premium funding, but they need it just as much.

Andrew Smith: The pupil premium is absolutely invaluable for us in our context. We could not attract the teachers, we could not train the teachers, we could not have the strong pastoral teams, we could not have the attendance team and all of the support that we put in to attract those families into school, to get to work with them, without that funding. As Helena said, more would be welcome because then we could do more, but without that funding we would struggle, because in those areas, as a teacher, you do need to want to champion to work in those areas.

Nick Hurn: To reiterate what has been said by a number of the witnesses, there are a number of families that I can think of in our particular schools that fall through the net that are equally as impoverished as the children who are receiving pupil premium support for whatever reason. Maybe they are not on the free school meal list, but there is a variety of reasons, or they work a small amount of hours that make them ineligible for various benefits. There is a large swathe. When I look at the deprivation indices in and around my school and compare it to the free school meals quota, there is a big gap. There are a lot more impoverished children and families who are not getting the support that they need.

Q168 **Jonathan Gullis:** It is very interesting to hear about the pupil premium because I agree. For the panel's benefit, I was a schoolteacher for eight years in secondary schools working in London and in Birmingham and was a head of year, so I worked in the pastoral care system as well as being a teacher. The pupil premium is absolutely vital.

I would like to ask the panel, first, do you think that you should have access to the Youth Investment Fund? Should we opening that up to schools or trusts to be able to put on additional activities? Obviously that is £500 million, a significant amount of reinvestment back in young people.

I released a paper for Onward, for example, yesterday regarding a four-week summer break, not necessarily taking two weeks away, but moving one week to the May half-term and one to the October half-term to help parents save some money over what is a six-week holiday, which is very harsh, and enabling that attainment gap not to be widened. As my report suggested, it takes about seven weeks for children to get back to where they were at the end of the academic year. Do you think that could play a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

small role and be a small solution in obviously this wider context of how we can tackle the attainment gap and therefore make the education system very effective?

My last one is obviously we are looking at the role of the education system. I said in a debate on free school meals that I think the role of the school is to educate, not be part of the welfare state. This was taken out of context by the Twitterati, which is not an uncommon thing. For me, my fear is do we put a lot of pressure on head teachers and teachers to go much wider than what their role is meant to be and what they are trained and skilled for, when we have a welfare system that maybe, as you have said earlier, is not being accessed as effectively by some of these families who need it because maybe they have a fear of the stigma attached to it or simply do not know how to access it and get the support that is needed?

Ian Mearns: Before I bring members of the panel back, I have Tom and Kim who wanted to come in.

Tom Hunt: I have quite a few questions. First, I think in virtually every session we have had so far looking at this issue, we have heard about the need for there to be different pathways and not just an academic pathway, but one relating to good quality vocational education and technical education, which is also vitally important. I guess this question is to Helena perhaps, who mentioned it at the start, but what specific steps need to be taken to do this, both in terms of potentially looking at the way Ofsted assess schools, but also other moves as well?

In terms of my other question, it is to do with the Holiday Activities and Food programme and obviously the recent announcement by the Government to extend this programme over Easter, summer and next Christmas. We had it in Ipswich this summer as one of the pilots and it seemed to work. Do you think there are any concrete benefits to the people we are talking about at the moment as a result of that news?

Thirdly, regarding teacher recruitment and retention, obviously the key thing is to get the best teachers in the schools where we need them the most. Are you, as a panel, open to the Government doing more to push financial incentives to get teachers where they are needed the most? For example, coastal towns and communities, where it might not be an attractive place to go, but you would want to go if there is a concrete incentive to go.

Ian Mearns: Kim wanted to ask a question, then I have Ruth, Claire and Clementine have all indicated.

Kim Johnson: My question is around pupil premium and the fact that schools get this allocation and they can use it on whatever they want. Should there be a regional weighting on pupil premium to be able to meet the needs? A lot of schools have suffered in the last 10 years from austerity, so does there need to be additional funding in this respect to meet those hardest hit?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ruth Robinson: I would like to address three points. First, about the pressure on head teachers to do more for our communities. Speaking personally, I think that is our role within a disadvantaged community. We have the children as a captive audience with us for 30, 40 hours a week and we are more than happy to do more than you would expect in many schools as long as we have the funding to do so. It is accepted by us that we can have a huge impact on their lives.

Somebody asked about recruitment and retention. For us, in a great blow, we heard the other week that you have reduced the funding for teacher training bursaries. That was a terrible piece of news because getting trainees into our schools, they need to get the bursary in order to be able to afford to train as teachers. We are forecasting that we might see less teachers applying to train to teach.

The final thing I would like to say is about vocational pathways. I do think vocational education is important for pupils, but we do have vocational qualifications on offer and I do believe it is very important that disadvantaged pupils get a strong academic curriculum through to the age of 16, so that English, maths and science are absolutely vital to give them the foundations for the future. I believe with the right education, the right attitudes, head teachers who believe in them, and calm schools with good behaviour, that disadvantaged white pupils can catch up with pupils from other groups and that they can then go on either to A-Levels or to good vocational qualifications post-16, but I think we need a strong academic offer for them.

Ian Mearns: There is a long list of people wanting to speak. Claire, Clementine, Helena and Nick. I have from the Committee Jonathan and Tom. Claire, please.

Chair: Ian, we need to finish this just after 11.05 am at the very latest.

Claire-Marie Cuthbert: I wanted to answer a point about recruitment and retention. I do not think financial incentives would help. I think that what people need is for teaching to be attractive in the moral sense. When you are working in these disadvantaged communities, you have to really want to work in these disadvantaged communities. No amount of money being thrown at it will attract the right teachers. I think that there needs to be a strong sense of moral purpose. I think there needs to be a strong sense of values and that strong sense of mission to want to make a difference to these young people. I am becoming increasingly concerned about the narrative around teaching as something that is financially attractive. People do not go into education for it to be financially attractive. You go into education to want to make a difference to children's lives. That is what the narrative needs to be.

Clementine Stewart: I will keep this very succinct. On Claire-Marie's point and also what Tom was raising about recruitment and retention, the moral imperative is absolutely essential, but then also the training and support that sits around that. Having worked in a school in special



HOUSE OF COMMONS

measures, it takes an awful lot of skill, knowledge and courage, I would say, to drive up those standards relentlessly day by day. Absolutely have the moral imperative but then put the framework around those people to be able to do the role effectively.

Then going back to Jonathan's question about the Youth Investment Fund and the structure of the year, I think to do something as fundamental as change the structure of the whole academic year would take a lot of research. It would need to be evidence-based. We would need to know the impact of that from academic professors, who truly understand it. There is some work to do in terms of combining the Youth Investment Fund and developing something a little bit like the NCS, the National Citizenship Service, but for younger children that parents can engage with, keep the children busy during the holidays, get a good meal, have some educational activities that bring enrichment and keep that brain ticking over for those six weeks and engage somehow, and that the parents get something from that too. That would be a very good first-stop shop to trial some of these approaches.

Helena Mills: I wanted to address the point about vocation and also about the financial incentives. The vocational academic pathways that I was talking about obviously are not just about disadvantaged children. It is very important. We all know that probably the lowest achieving group is the white disadvantaged low ability, not necessarily the high attaining white poor, who often do get great GCSE results and A-Level results and go on to university. It links to the issue around parenting and culture of the white poor. Kim felt we were not addressing that, but I think we have. The culture of some of our white parents is that they do not want them to go to university. We have lots of very bright children who have gone off this year and they are training to be electricians and plumbers. That is fantastic, because I can't get a plumber for love nor money, so we need them as a country.

It is about valuing that. As a nation we need to have children and parents who understand that that is a great option. If you look at the Finnish system, post-16 everybody does examinations. There are no league tables, so they are not published, but those children go off and it is equitable whether you go on the vocational route or whether you go on the academic route. I think we need to move towards something like that.

The second thing about financial incentives for teaching, I agree with what colleagues have said. People go into teaching because they are passionate, but our schools are all in the south-east and teachers need money because they cannot afford the rents and they cannot afford to buy property. It is very challenging working with the white poor. All parents are very concerned about their children and they articulate that concern in very different ways. I work in communities where my staff face aggression on a daily basis and sometimes they get fed up with that. If they can't afford their rent or to buy a house, they get very fed up with



it and look for careers outside of teaching. We have tracked it and we lose a lot of teachers after five years, partly financial, but also because it is a very tough job if you are working in communities where you are working with disadvantaged families who do not support you.

Nick Hurn: Just a couple of points, certainly talking about the vocational pathways. There needs to be more innovative thinking from the Government with regards on how this can be achieved, studio schools, free schools, all have too many problems attached to them, having a basic need, jumping through too many hoops. There are so many excellent examples of partnerships out there. In our area, we have a massive shortage in IT, engineering, built environment, life sciences. We have a massive group of students who would be eligible and we do not have the bridge between it, that is what is missing. A reasonable bridge.

Secondly, with regards teacher recruitment. I was lucky enough to be on a teacher apprenticeship trailblazing group and we missed a massive opportunity in that group. We talked about apprenticeships for A-level students into teaching over a seven-year course doing a year degree working within a school and learning to be a teacher. I thought that was a brilliant idea but that got quashed. We do, in our area, nominate 6th form students, keep in touch with them and then when they go through university get them back on teacher training. There needs to be more innovative thinking with regards to keeping our best students in our most challenging areas and that is certainly a way to do that.

Q169 **Chair:** Sorry to interrupt, Nick. Do you think there should be teaching degree apprenticeships? I know there are post-graduate ones but teaching degree apprenticeships.

Nick Hurn: I do.

Q170 **Chair:** Do all of you think that, just briefly?

Andrew Smith: We have had them in our school and they have been very successful but both these and the SCITT programmes, the one-year teaching training, you do not get the depth of understanding of, for example, the teaching of reading, child development. That bit is missing on these quick routes into teaching.

Chair: You all agree?

Nick Hurn: I am not talking about a quick route, I am talking about a long route; a route where they are immersed in a whole variety of different experiences. I am not talking about a quick short, sharp-like teacher graduation programme.

Q171 **Chair:** You all agree though that there should be teaching degree apprenticeships, not just post-graduate degree apprenticeships, is that right, to help the recruitment issue?

Andrew Smith: Yes.



Q172 **Jonathan Gullis:** Claire-Marie, thank you so much for finally saying what I have been banging on about, which is that throwing money at teaching does not necessarily make it a better profession. I want teachers in the profession for the right reasons, and there are many teachers that are. As we have seen, throwing money at starting salaries has not done anything for teacher recruitment. We are still seeing, after five years, as Helena said, too many teachers leave.

Ruth, just very briefly, I thank you for coming back about the head teachers. I agree head teachers do play an important role. Again my only concern is that with all the additional pressures on a school with Ofsted inspections, with obviously getting results, but also looking after some of our most vulnerable in society, I do worry that we will eventually push teachers to breaking point at some stage if it is all on them and not on other people to also support in a wider sense.

Tom Hunt: It is a bit simplistic. We all know that virtually every teacher is not in teaching for the money. We know that. But ultimately when I have a teacher in a school in my constituency who got a first-class degree from Oxford and if money was their focus they could make a huge amount. They are not driven by money but they do want to be able to buy a house. Being able to home own should not be blocked to them because they decided to go into teaching. It is a little bit simplistic just to say that money does not matter at all. Of course I get the fact it is about moral mission and you do not go into teaching for the money but we should not be blind to that.

The suggestion about financial incentives came from Teach First, who work with these graduates every day so I do take what they say with some seriousness.

Regarding technical education and apprenticeships, if you want to go into the good quality educational technical route, a base achievement in academic progress is obviously key. If you are from one of these backgrounds and you want to go to university then you should absolutely feel like you can. I get that. But it is not the only route and it might not be the best route. More steps can be taken to promote better quality, technical education pathways from an earlier age to sit alongside a good academic route as well.

In terms of some parents of kids from low income white backgrounds not wanting their kids to go to university, they might be bang on and I am glad we have dropped the 50% target for kids going to university. University can be the right route for some of these kids but not the only route. Yes, there is vocational education there, it might not be the highest quality at the moment all the time.

Chair: Can we just get a quick answer to Kim's point about whether the pupil premium should be ring-fenced please?

Helena Mills: Absolutely. The schools should be able to use it for the pupil premium children but using the strategies that they know best



HOUSE OF COMMONS

based on the research. If you look at any of the research from EEF, for example, it is about high-quality teachers that make the biggest difference.

Ruth Robinson: I would back that up. All of the evidence suggests that these pupils achieve best when they are in schools with fantastic teaching and good behaviour systems. You have to spend money to get that. We spend money on people who lead behaviour and obviously they are there for the whole school. They deal with all the pupils. If you ring-fence money and said you can only spend it on something that is going to work for your disadvantaged pupils, it does not make sense. You have to be able to do what makes sense with them, what makes sense for them is a great education in a school where they can learn in disruption-free classrooms. Too many schools in white working-class communities have not cracked that so too many pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are in classrooms where they are unable to learn effectively.

Q173 **Chair:** Before I pass over to David Johnson who is now going to chair the next section for 20-odd minutes, can I just ask you again on the teacher recruitment issue? Should we re-establish local teacher training colleges or providers in areas where there is great deprivation or problems with recruiting teachers?

Ruth Robinson: I believe that school-based training is best because here we get our teachers and train them at the Academy so they understand the approaches that work best. That is the preferred route.

Andrew Smith: I disagree slightly. It depends which school you are going to. It is probably great in your schools, Ruth, but when you are looking at schools nationally there are some schools that can't provide the quality of education for those teachers that I am sure you do. I am not necessarily saying, Robert, that it should be in an area of deprivation because a good balance would be good, but there is a case to reintroduce initial teacher training degrees at university level.

Nick Hurn: Mix of both. I agree with Ruth, in the right school that sort of training is invaluable. Some of our best teachers have come because we have trained them and got them into the areas of understanding behaviour, and so on. But I take on board Andrew's point, if you do not have those schools in that area you have to find a different route.

Helena Mills: I was part of the London Challenge when I first started teaching and it was an exciting project to be involved in and everybody who was training to be a teacher knew that they were in London and they were going to transform London. Our teacher training now, we need to focus on the white poor. This has to be an exciting thing. Local hubs will help with that, that you are part of this challenge and your training to be a teacher here is going to make a difference in those areas. Local hubs make a difference. Ruth, once you let those teacher trainees into your area they tend to love it and stay if they are well-supported.



Chair: Thank you, that is very important, local hubs as you call them. Thank you, Ian, for chairing that.

Q174 **David Johnston:** I wanted to come back to some of the discussion about the home-learning environment and also the local context. Is it the panel's view that the home-learning environment has a disproportionate effect on disadvantaged white pupils and if it is, in what ways do you think it is different to those from other disadvantaged backgrounds? I saw Ruth's hand go up and then I will go to Helena.

Ruth Robinson: I do think it is different and other panel members have tried to express earlier that it is that the parental support and drive and ambition for their children feels different within white working-class homes. One of the things that we have done—I know it has been discussed, I have heard MPs mention this—is the possibility of extending the school day. Our pupils start at 8.20 and finish at 3.35, which gives them an extra hour each day, an extra day a week, because we know that some of their home-learning environments are not ideal.

We provide desks for pupils to work at, so our primary children, year 6, are given an exam desk to work at if they need it because often they have not even got somewhere to sit and work effectively. I do think there are issues and some of the solution may be around extending the day for disadvantaged pupils.

Q175 **David Johnston:** Do those things not also apply to other disadvantaged pupils? What you talk about there about not having a space to work at at home, and so on, do you not think that also applies?

Ruth Robinson: They could do but that parental commitment to what will make a difference for your child, so having worked in schools with large numbers of children with an ethnic background, their parents would be saying, "No, you go home and you will do your homework". The idea that you will study for two, two and a half, three hours a night is quite natural to them and it is very different within a white working-class community.

Helena Mills: I would echo what Ruth said there. We have some schools where we have high numbers of disadvantaged but the majority are black and ethnic minority groups. Those parents absolutely, when their child goes home, they make them study but also they are talking to that child from a very early age saying, "You are going to go to university, you have to get good GCSE grades, you have to get good A-level grades". It is a bit of a stereotype but there are significant numbers among our white poor where the parents are not saying that.

What I feel, and I am sure my colleagues here are all doing this, and that is why we are invited here today, is that when parenting is poor—I use that word very carefully—I do think the school takes on an increasingly important role and makes the difference. If you look at schools who are doing things like Ruth said about extending the school day, making sure that kids have prep time after school, they have spaces to learn, those



HOUSE OF COMMONS

schools are where the children are successful academically. The poor parenting can be a barrier but as long as the school takes on that parenting role, again I have said it several times, that requires additional resources and funding for the schools to do that.

Q176 David Johnston: I am going to bring in a couple of my colleagues but just before I do that, Helena, there is obviously a debate about the extent to which schools should be playing the role that ideally parenting would play, and some people would say that is not a school's job. Where do you stand on that?

Helena Mills: I agree with colleagues earlier. It is the school's job and I say about our schools, especially our secondary schools, is that we feed them after school. We give them tea. I said if we could bath them and put them to bed we would because we take on that parenting role. Not because our parents are not effective parents, but they lack the skill to parent the child academically. We take on that role for them and take that pressure away from the parents. But that does come with a cost. Colleagues have said this: leaders in schools in areas where you are serving the white poor, they do that because they have a strong moral purpose and they are prepared to give above and beyond.

Q177 Jonathan Gullis: Helena and Ruth, I enjoyed your previous comments. I will always respect the school does go above and beyond and it does have a major role in the community. Again, just to alleviate my fears, it is a large burden on the school over the term and that does sometimes play into the recruitment crisis that we referred to earlier. I do agree, especially in areas that are disadvantaged, the school has an important role and should be a leader in that.

It is interesting to hear what Claire-Marie said earlier about the digital divide. I have done some work on this and pointed out, rightly so, that we saw an extortionate amount of pupils not able to access online because it could just be that the one mobile phone that is mum's is the actual only form of technology that is in the household.

We saw the Government invest obviously in laptops; is this something that you think should be continued longer term for schools to have and then lend out, if necessary? Or do you think there are other ways in which we can bridge the digital divide that is maybe more cost-effective? As we know the impacts of Covid on the economy are going to be very significant.

Andrew Smith: The laptops are all well and good as long as you have broadband. When you are trying to work off your mum's phone and you have three brothers and sisters who are trying to access that as well it is a little bit tricky. You need dongles, you need all kinds of things. In terms of the technology, the laptops are a great idea but we need the infrastructure behind them.

Nick Hurn: The laptops are a good idea. In 2012 we had a rebuild, we had some money left over and we bought a laptop for every child; so we



had 1,500 laptops. I wish we had that now. But the problem is, it is sustaining that. Money ran out, we were not able to keep up with the technology so within two or three years they became obsolete. One thing is to refresh, build an infrastructure around what you have at the present day, but then there must be commitment to ensure that that is maintained. We do not have that facility anymore.

Laptops are what you need. I do not like the idea of phones because they cannot type, they do not learn to use the correct programmes. As colleagues have mentioned, it is not just about the actual hardware, it is the connectivity. The connectivity just is not out there at the moment for most families.

David Johnston: A lot of hands going up but I do want to bring in Kim, so Claire-Marie just briefly and then I will bring in Kim.

Claire-Marie Cuthbert: Your question about the dongles is a good one. I would like to say though there is a bigger issue here and it is to do with the digital infrastructure for us as a country. The gap for the haves and the have-nots is wide, so if you want superfast broadband you have to pay quite a large amount of money each month. For some of our white working-class pupils that is just not an option because they need to be spending their money on rent or food, or what have you, but the price of broadband, if we want to level up that agenda, is something that we need to be having a look at as a country.

Q178 **Kim Johnson:** I just want to pick up the point about the comparisons between white working-class and black working-class households and parents' aspirations. Helena mentioned the stereotypes; the black community is not homogenous, and there are differences and disparities within that group. Using the stereotype sometimes is not helpful, would you agree?

Helena Mills: It is probably one of the issues with our disadvantaged is that we tend to use these very stereotypical labels and that can end up being one of the barriers for children to be successful because you label the white pupil premium child and teachers' expectations can almost plummet. Again, part of this vision that we need to have for education is also about the language that we use about our disadvantaged. We have to be very careful because it is that reinforcing some of the underachievement. We are doing some research around that. We are trying to drop labels like pupil premium, free school meal, low ability—whatever that means—because you are right, that can just reinforce underachievement.

Q179 **David Johnston:** I am going to go on to another question now. What, in your experience, works well in terms of engaging and supporting parents from disadvantaged white backgrounds? How can that be spread more widely? The first hand to go up was Clementine'.

Clementine Stewart: It is something I feel very passionately about. It is all about building relationships early on, even before the children start



school. Being known in the community, being an inviting, warm, welcoming place where parents feel comfortable to come in and start building those relationships. In my submission, we have been very clear in terms of saying these are hard relationships with high expectations that are rooted in love. You ask a lot of your parents but support them to be able to drive up those aspirations with you.

That involves developing their want and their enthusiasm to be involved in the school but then also their ability too, so running workshops that again are low-risk, high-engagement activities. Even things like bringing an element of food. They come in and have a curry in a bowl and listen about how phonics is developed at reception. With it you get a free meal and you get to hear a little bit about teaching. If some of that goes in through osmosis then even better. Just constantly doing it but holding parents to account about being the best that they can be for their children is of absolute importance and has real and meaningful change at the schools where I am governor.

Q180 David Johnston: Let's pose that as the answer, how should that then be spread by policy makers listening to this?

Clementine Stewart: There is something in there about head teachers having to set that as part of how the school operates and runs. Then it might be that through your Ofsted framework that that relationship and quality of relationships and engagement is looked at in even more depth. Then sharing good examples of best practice where it does work in schools so that other schools can then upskill that ability and have those standards and ability to have those relationships is important in sharing it around.

Nick Hurn: Talking about all the things that Clementine mentioned as well as in conjunction with that, we have been piloting a new scheme to help parental engagement, to help encourage parents to talk to the children about the work because research tells us that if a parent speaks to their child for 10 or 15 minutes a day about the work, that has a massive motivational effect on the students. We start to use a platform called Free Flow Info, which allows the parents or teacher to upload or download the work of a child and then on to a parent's platform. The parent can have a look at the work that that child has done for the day and then ask them questions about that.

Further up the line, with older children, we have been able to link that—say a child has done a course, what the teacher can do is send back a series of questions that the parent can ask the child about the work that they are doing. It has proved to be very motivational and certainly has a lot more of the parents engaged than have ever been engaged before, talking about the work with the children.

Q181 David Johnston: That is the tool that you use but what is the conversation before that about why a parent should use that tool?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Nick Hurn: We show the parents all the research. Every parent, bar maybe a tiny proportion, will want their children to do the best they possibly can. A lot of them just do not know how to help them. That is the fundamental problem. The parents do not know how to support their children's learning.

This conversation is about giving them a tool to help them support their children's learning and a link to the teacher so the teacher can help them help their children. It is the three-way combination: school, parents, child. It works quite effectively at the moment. Getting that message across is incredibly important.

I rarely come across a parent that does not want the best for their children in regard to where they come from.

Q182 **Jonathan Gullis:** I thought your question was excellent, David, regarding this and I am thoroughly enjoying what I am hearing because parental engagement is absolutely vital. One of the big issues we have is, as we have said earlier, parents being let down by a poor education system in the past. Of my workforce in Stoke-on-Trent, 12% have no formal qualifications. That will obviously pay a huge part in parents engaging with their children.

What role does the panel think schools can play in adult education, specifically maybe linking into the lifetime skills guarantee that was announced by the Prime Minister for level 3 qualifications?

Claire-Marie Cuthbert: That is a good point that you have just made. Certainly in my multi-academy trust, one of the things that we are encountering is third generation unemployment but also adult illiteracy and numeracy. One of the things that we have done is provided level 1 and level 2 qualifications for our parents. The vast majority of our parents want to be able to help their children. They absolutely do. The problem is that for some of them they just do not know how to. When we are talking about social mobility and when we are talking about levelling up, it is about levelling up at every point, not just for schools. Because parental engagement is so important we need to be able to give our parents the tools to be able to help and support their children. They want to. They genuinely do. But there is nothing more soul-destroying for a parent who is trying to help their child in primary school and, "We did not do it like that when we were at school". They want to help their children with the homework, they just do not necessarily have the tools or the skills to be able to do it because education has moved on at such a pace.

Helena Mills: It was my number one message that I wanted to get across today: if we want to tackle the disadvantage of the white poor, it is about adult education. We find that in our communities is that our parents have had a terrible experience, they have almost given up hope. I agree with my colleagues. They want their children to do well but they have almost given up on themselves. In fact in some of our schools, we have been piloting this for several years now, we do not run parental



HOUSE OF COMMONS

workshops at primary school to show the parents how to support your child with maths. We run parental workshops for the parents so that they can do some basic maths, so that they can understand how to use digital technology, when they have it, more effectively. That is part of the cause of under-achievement and it needs to be tackled. The schools can play a role in that but the higher education system—

Chair: David, just to make the point that we are doing a separate inquiry into adult education and lifelong learning. What you have said is incredibly important. We will link that inquiry to this one.

David Johnston: I should just say that the parliamentary internet is once again failing for me and Jonathan so I apologise if I do not see your hand, but, Ruth, I was going to bring you in on the last question or if you wanted to say something about this one.

Ruth Robinson: To back up what other colleagues have said about parental engagement. We are looking at generational change here so we are hoping that the generation of children that come through United Learning schools will have a different set of expectations and competencies when they are parents themselves. That is important.

One of the ways we help and engage our parents is one of the mantras we use in school as well. It is tough love. We demand high attendance, we demand that their children do their homework in the same way as we demand that they wear their uniform with pride. What we do is if any of those aspects are not met—attendance, homework and uniform—there is a sanction and what we often are doing then is engaging parents when their children have a sanction and then coming in with the support to help the parent help their child. But there has to be an aspect of tough love. I know for eight years working within this community we have seen parental engagement and support for the school transformed so now we will see 97% of our parents attending parent review days. I do think it can be done but it is tough love that is needed.

Chair: David, we need to finish at 11.30 to move on to the next section.

David Johnston: Do you want me to ask the next one?

Chair: Kim is going to do the final section but please carry on.

Q183 **David Johnston:** It is the last one anyway, which is about the local context. We have talked about the home environment but thinking more now about the local community, the employment opportunities in the local community, multi-generational deprivation, what role do you think that plays? What role can youth and community organisations play in that context? I cannot see hands anymore because my screen has frozen but, Andrew, do you have something on this?

Andrew Smith: Place has an enormous role in all of this. It would be helpful if, when we are comparing data around free school meals or whatever it might be, we bring place into that as well and not just the general free school meals. For our school in Clacton it is quite a challenge



HOUSE OF COMMONS

when they are compared to a school in London, which has a completely different ethnic makeup. Whereas if we were compared to a school in Skegness or Great Yarmouth then that would be a more comparable likeness.

Nick Hurn: I touched on this earlier, you step out of your house in Tower Hamlets, you can get on the Tube and immediately you are faced with lots of aspirational images. You step out of your door in East Gateshead, you are just surrounded by lots of housing estates, very few opportunities and quite a dull view. That has a key element. What can be and what is likely to be are questions that the students ask themselves in these areas and how you get round that, I do not know, but it definitely is a factor. I would agree with that wholeheartedly.

Helena Mills: I agree how important the local context is. The role that local businesses can play is massive in tackling the aspiration of disadvantaged children. I know that in Harlow, for example, where there has been real investment in science technology and there have been a lot of local business partners working with our schools, that has helped us. It is not just the schools alone that I oversee that are raising the aspirations. It is also local business partners through mentoring schemes, being involved in governance of the local schools. We sponsor a UTC in Harlow and the local businesses are heavily involved there in mentoring children from the age of 14 all the way to 19. In fact, one of the businesses has used that as a recruitment ground for degree apprenticeships and I am really beginning to see social mobility there. Some of our white poor who are a little bit reluctant to go to university partly because of the debt now are getting onto degree apprenticeships with local firms, which is great.

Clementine Stewart: I was going to continue that point about apprenticeships and how important that end of school piece must be here in engaging families and children with that much earlier on so you have that view on career development, aspiration, apprenticeships, T-Levels and all the different opportunities, rather than just this funnel to a point of failure. It has to be a much broader offering and the earlier you can engage that the better.

Chair: Thank you, David. I am going to move over to Kim now. Thank you for chairing that session. We have about 15 to 20 minutes for this part.

Q184 **Kim Johnson:** The fourth and final section is on the impact of coronavirus. This Committee has received lots of evidence that supports the assumption that there is a widening of the educational attainment gap particularly for the white working class. I would like to know how the coronavirus has affected the disadvantaged white pupils in your schools and what should be done to address this? I would like to start with Nick first, please.



Nick Hurn: It has had a really devastating effect because of a lot of the issues we have talked about before. The lack of digital connections, so any of the children who have been sent home for periods of time out of that group have invariably fallen further and further behind. They have become less motivated. When they have been due to return it has been more difficult to encourage them to get back to school and when they have come back to school they have been less motivated. It has had a massive negative effect on all our strategies to deal with this particular cohort of children. It is the lack of ability for these children to work at home that has been a key issue. Colleagues have talked about this quite extensively already and it has been a very difficult situation to address.

We have also had increased costs, massive costs for cover supervisors and teachers and unfortunately a lot of insurance companies that cover staff absence have not been paying out for whatever reason. They have reneged on lots of their agreements since Covid-19 so that has put a massive strain on the finances to be able to do interventions because we have spent a lot of our money on PPE, cleaning and also cover. There have been some real negative aspects to this that have compounded an already difficult situation.

Q185 **Kim Johnson:** So, the issue of digital divide, finances and resources is a major issue. I see Ruth's hand. Ruth, would you like to come in to share your issues?

Ruth Robinson: One of the big things we have noticed, we are an all-through academy so we have children from the age of two or three to 18, is the impact on reading fluency in the lower primary school ages. They did not seem when they came back to have forgotten what they had been taught previously but there was a big gap in that summer term from March onwards when they lacked those foundational months of their reading fluency.

To back up what colleagues have said, I think that laptops, broadband, dongles are absolutely crucial. I believe every child should have an entitlement to be able to work online in the evenings, at the weekends and in their holidays, not just if there is a lockdown. We should have that expectation that it should become an entitlement that the Government funds. Finally, just to back up, we have probably spent £150,000 already this year in additional Covid-19 expenditure and we are only in late November.

Andrew Smith: To echo Nick, it has had a devastating effect. It has brought about a nervousness in our parental community and their lack of resilience and coping skills have come to the fore. We have had three or four positive diagnoses and that has ended up in our percentage attendance dropping to 83% currently in our school in Clacton as compared with our school here in Braintree that is at 98%. I think that directly reflects those parents' ability to cope. I also back up what Ruth said about reading and fluency but also further up the school the writing stamina has also dropped off.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Helena Mills: I suppose I feel at the moment it is too early to tell exactly how big the gap is. There are some initial signs. We are finding it is really hard when children are isolating to transition to online learning for the younger children. It works really well from Year 2 upwards but reception children are missing out when they are at home because accessing online learning is very difficult for that age group.

Even for the younger children who we are trying to deliver a normal school timetable, it is very dependent for those younger children on the support they get from adults when they are at home. It is a bit of a lottery at the moment. Some of our schools have not had a single case. We have 11 schools but some of them have bubbles in and out like the hokey cokey. That is a concern for us.

I would say about secondary age children that our attendance has never been better. They are pleased to be in school and they are highly motivated. We are noticing that our disadvantaged children are working harder because they are aware of the gaps and they are very worried about whether it is going to be an exam or a centre-assessed grade. The good news is it is making them work even harder than they normally do because they do not know whether it is going to be an exam or a centre-assessed grade.

Q186 **Chair:** I was going to save it to the end but if Kim does not mind I wanted to ask you all what you think about what should happen in terms of exams next year.

Helena Mills: Year 13 is a little bit different in our organisation because we did online learning straight away and they are a bit older and a bit more independent. We have found there is a gap and we are trying to catch that up. The current Year 11 in some ways are less prepared to have exams on the full curriculum than last year's Year 11. I felt that centre-assessed grades worked well if the leadership in that school or the organisation made sure they moderated that and were professional and honest about that.

A lot of schools in the country did that, I am not convinced that everybody did because there was not that guidance. I personally would like centre-assessed grades rather than exams and we must not underestimate the impact this has had, not just for the disadvantaged but for all young people, on their wellbeing and mental health. The anxiety of some of our very bright children, some of those are PP children who are really anxious about that time out of school—we are noticing our referrals to counselling and mental health has gone up tremendously.

Q187 **Kim Johnson:** We are getting information that the rate of transmission in school is increasing exponentially and that is likely to have an impact in terms of students going forward as well, isn't it?

Helena Mills: Anecdotally, I know there is one Year 11 boy—I still teach English GCSE—whose brother was positive so he had to self-isolate and



then he came back in. Then there was a positive case in his year group so he had to self-isolate and now his mum is positive so he is self-isolating again. That child has only been in school for about three weeks.

Q188 **Kim Johnson:** Ruth, do you have some comments to make?

Ruth Robinson: It was about exams and I think every head teacher is different. For me personally I believe exams are the fairest way to measure students' achievement and attainment. However, we have a closed Year 11 bubble and I can imagine head teachers in schools where they have had Year 11s at home may feel very differently. I think exams are the fairest way to measure pupils' achievement.

Q189 **Kim Johnson:** In terms of where we are to at the moment, more people are likely to lose their job. There is likely to be a job tsunami that is going to have an impact on disadvantaged kids that in the long run is going to affect them in terms of exams. Claire, did you want to make a comment?

Claire-Marie Cuthbert: To counter what Ruth was saying I think an exam is the fairest way to judge how children perform in normal circumstances but these are not normal circumstances. If there were to be terminal examinations at the end of this academic year it is going to cause huge disparity and there is not that level playing field.

One of the things I would like to throw out to the panel is what are we actually measuring? The students in your multi-academy trust that have 100% attendance when you have not had a bubble that is closed versus the poor little poppet that has already had six weeks of self-isolating. It is not a level playing field, so whatever system we choose to use, speaking as a parent of a Year 11 girl myself, it is causing considerable anxiety. The kids just want to know what is going to happen. I would echo what other people on the panel have said, it is causing increasing anxiety, which is meaning more referrals to CAMHS, more referrals to mental health organisations and counsellors.

Clementine Stewart: The only thing I was going to add that I do not think we have discussed as much as we might need to at some point is CPD for staff as we move to this hybrid model. I think now there are very clear expectations that learning must continue whether children are in school or at home and as you look further up towards exam years this is so important. It is important throughout. We are expecting staff to just be able to teach a hybrid model or teach from home or have all their bubble at home or be in school live and we just have not caught up yet in terms of showing staff how best to do that, which pedagogical approaches work, what evidence-based initiatives work.

If you take something like the Rosenshine principles, how do you break those down and make them work digitally? That backs up Helena's point about reception children trying to learn on an iPad right up to Year 11 needing an equity of offering. We must make sure we support our staff to best deliver this otherwise the playing field will become even more unfair.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

That has to be a big piece of work for school leaders and MAT trusts and, indeed, all of you to help us with that.

Q190 **Kim Johnson:** You make an important point in terms of the hybrid approach. The Open University has been delivering online teaching for years and for many teachers it is a new phenomenon so there is some need for additional training and support.

Nick Hurn: Just to talk about the exams, I agree with colleagues that the best way of measuring a student's performance is via an exam but I think we have missed a trick. If we had made a decision at the beginning of the year that we were going to do a slimmed down curriculum for everybody regardless of what sort of absences you had, you had a focus and an area you could concentrate on. I have five big secondary schools in my trust, some have had Year 11 in and out, in and out. Some have maybe only had them out once so there is a big disparity in what sort of experience each child has had.

If you go to the centre-assessed grades to try to avoid people gaming the system they should have a rigorous moderation system and that is quite easy. Send the grades in and if they look wildly optimistic send in a couple of people to have a look at the quality of the work and moderate it. I like the idea of centre-assessed grades if there is no other option but they should be moderated because quite frankly people do take advantage of the situation unfairly and that does not do anyone any favours. It certainly undervalues the performance of students who deserve to be credited with a good performance. I think with Wales opting for the centre-assessed grade system already it has put a lot of pressure on our system.

Q191 **Kim Johnson:** The Government made £1 billion available for catch-up funding and I would be interested to find out how any of your schools have used any of that funding in terms of helping support these pupils we have talked about. I will go to Ruth and then Nick.

Ruth Robinson: One thing we are doing is offering our teachers the opportunity to do catch-up sessions with pupils after school because they know the pupils well enough, and obviously if we can pay them a bit extra they can provide a bespoke catch-up session that is carefully planned for each individual child. That is one of the things we will be doing.

Nick Hurn: Likewise with Ruth we have been doing this for a long time. I was a little bit disappointed with the roll out of the national tutoring programme. It is a brilliant idea but I would like to have seen more school trusts have the ability to engage with us rather than national companies, because the way we have done our tutoring programme we ensure the tutors work with heads of department, heads of department work with the students and there is a real link so they focus on key areas.



I have my concerns about where they will get these people of high quality from for these big national tutoring programmes and how they will deliver for all the children that need this help. That money could have been spread a little bit further to trusts that could have helped alleviate some of the strain on that.

Helena Mills: I want to agree with what Nick just said and then tell you we are using our own staff to do the additional tutoring in primary and secondary. The other thing, and we have not talked about it today, is that one of the biggest barriers is about poor literacy so we have used the catch-up funding to buy books. Books are incredibly expensive so we have not ever been able to do this before but we are making sure that every child has access to a text book in the secondary phase and we have just bought our primary disadvantaged kids loads of reading books to address that vocabulary gap in the primary phase.

Q192 **Kim Johnson:** Do any of the panel have any further comments to make about what needs to happen in supporting children who have been affected by Covid-19 before we finish?

Andrew Smith: To echo what people have said, we are using it for catch-up sessions but we are also using extra focus support, high quality support within the classroom and, like Helena, we are thinking about reading books as well.

Clementine Stewart: The thing I was going to add is all schools did a very strong baseline assessment at the beginning of the academic year. It is essential that we keep referring back to that data to make sure the children are moving on and where they are not drilling down and focusing support on the specific individuals—many of whom may be our white British free school meal children but may also be many other different children too—and making sure there is a tailored journey of progress and support put into that child so they do make up that lost ground.

Q193 **Tom Hunt:** In essence there is an agreement that there is a bit of a problem with how some families and parents perceive education as passed down from generations within white families from low income backgrounds, particularly compared to other ethnic minority families who may have a different attitude towards education. Perhaps therefore we can agree that the closure of schools and home schooling having a much more important role could have impacted negatively disproportionately on white children from low income backgrounds.

Helena Mills: Yes.

Nick Hurn: Yes, definitely agree.

Andrew Smith: Definitely.

Kim Johnson: I do not see any more contributions so I will hand over to you, Chair.

Q194 **Chair:** Thank you, Kim, for chairing that. Can I ask you about the exams



HOUSE OF COMMONS

again? If it is the Government's intention that exams take place how do you ensure there is a level playing field for those students who have been disadvantaged by the lockdown or are sent home currently because of Covid-19 outbreaks and the like? Andrew, I do not know if you said if you wanted exams to take place or not.

Andrew Smith: We are mainly a primary and I think we should go to teacher assessment because of the variety of experiences different children have. That is probably a question for the politicians: how can it be equitable? How can it be that a child in Helena's school who has missed six weeks of schooling has to sit the same exam as somebody at Ruth's school who has had high quality teaching all the way through from September?

I was going to bring in what Clem said about the teacher training and the different quality of people teaching from home or teaching from school over the internet. I think that has an impact on it as well.

Clementine Stewart: I agree with that, and again I am predominantly primary, in an ideal world you would have that equity of experience at assessment but while you have whole bubbles going home, some children have had absolutely no education from March to July compared to those who have had very rapid move to online. It is just not a fair playing field.

Q195 **Chair:** We discussed whether exams should take place. There were differing views among you but given they are likely to take place, and I say likely in a very mild way given what is going on and what has happened in the past, how do you ensure the left behind pupils catch up? When there are Covid breaks and children are sent home, how do you ensure they catch up and there is a level playing field for those doing exams? Do you cut the curriculum? Do you cut the amount of papers? Do you change the content of the exam?

Claire-Marie Cuthbert: I think the horse has already bolted with regard to that. We as educators and school leaders could have done with this conversation at the beginning of the academic year. I appreciate you could not have foreseen a second wave, but to alter the curriculum now and to be able to get those specifications out in time, to be able to get the markers you need, to be able to get those papers marked on time, certainly at GCSE level is going to be a logistical nightmare.

There is another bigger political element to this in the fact that you have two other nations doing something completely different. You have Scotland doing something that is a little bit different and you have Wales doing something a little bit different. I will come back to my equitability point, how is this a level playing field for all children?

Ruth Robinson: I want to give a shout out to the Oak National Academy that was not in place when we went into lockdown and was very quickly set up. I think it has been brilliant. Don't forget we have the Oak National Academy lessons now available for children who are at home. Secondly, if



HOUSE OF COMMONS

exams have to go ahead, and I am not saying it is ideal or equitable, optional questions is one idea that is being mooted so depending on which parts of the curriculum schools have been able to focus on pupils would be able to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. Finally, if we have to go ahead how do we make it fair? Every Year 11 must have a Chromebook and they must have access to broadband.

Q196 **Chair:** You were talking about computers and a Chromebook costs less than £200 nowadays, and you can get eight years' worth of software so you can keep them almost for eight years because the software is updated. Helena?

Helena Mills: I do not think exams should go ahead and I love exams. Our schools are really good at preparing for them.

Q197 **Chair:** If they do what will you do to help the catch up?

Helena Mills: We are already doing that. Everybody in the country has assumed the exams are going to go ahead so there is a huge amount of additional teaching going on. People have tried to make sensible choices about the topics they teach in history and English where there is a slight reduction of the curriculum. The children are working incredibly hard to catch up because they are conscious of their gaps. It is the interventions and the tutoring; that is what we are doing.

I would say some of the exam boards have been less helpful than others. I will not name anybody but, for example, in our English curriculum we know there are changes in the two papers but we do not have any specimen materials. When we have a new GCSE syllabus we have time to prepare for it and we always have specimen materials. We do not have specimen papers to look at and from my experience of teaching English to disadvantaged white children they need to know what the exam paper looks like because they are already particularly underconfident. Some of those issues need to be addressed.

Q198 **Chair:** Could you have a hybrid system where you have exams in the core subjects perhaps with reduced papers and then centre-assessed grades for the rest of it?

Nick Hurn: That would be something that would be worth exploring because, as colleagues have said, how would you possibly ensure you have an equitable set of criteria to measure the students against if you go ahead and do a full set of exams? There are so many children who have had their education interrupted. A hybrid idea would work but I would want the centre-assessed grades moderated correctly this time round and not just left. I think reduced options for the core subjects and moderated centre-assessed grades.

Q199 **Chair:** Is there anyone else on the hybrid version?

Ruth Robinson: It is a possibility. I can see how it would work maybe with English, maths and science having their exams and others with



HOUSE OF COMMONS

centre-assessed grades but I agree there has to be a very strong moderation process in place.

Claire-Marie Cuthbert: I echo what other witnesses said. I think a hybrid model would be the best of both worlds if you were to do examinations slimmed down in core and moderate the non-core, but there needs to be a moderation process around that.

Clementine Stewart: I think there is a piece of work here to do as well in terms of gaining the confidence of educationalists and educational leaders. If there is an open and transparent process that engages with thought leaders in the world of assessment who are basing things on cognitive research and science it means whatever decision that you, as policy makers and politicians, made have been done in conjunction with school leaders, policy writers who understand cognitive science and current research into assessment that may well help to give confidence in that system in what has already been a challenging year.

Q200 **Chair:** Last week we had the Chief Inspector of Schools and she said if exams did not take place students would lose motivation and structure and you may have a situation where pupils were not turning up to school because there were no exams. What is the general view about that, Ruth?

Ruth Robinson: I don't agree with that. Every school leader is responsible for making sure their pupils are motivated so whatever system you give us we will help our children rise to that challenge.

Helena Mills: My experience of the children coming back in September is they are more terrified of centre-assessed grades than they are of exams. They have never been so nice to their teachers and they are working incredibly hard because we are basically saying to them it could be an exam or it could be a centre-assessed grade and you need to provide the evidence. We love exams but sometimes exams do not capture everything a child can do, whereas if it was centre moderated you are capturing all the knowledge and skills they have. I agree it has to be moderated.

Q201 **Chair:** Would you be happy with a hybrid system?

Helena Mills: The issue with the hybrid is about the content. It is about the content in those subjects, so in maths and science the content has not changed. What has changed in science is you do not have to conduct the experiments but sometimes doing the experiments helps you understand those and therefore answer questions about them in the exam paper. It is also this lack of equity about time in and out of school.

I have talked about my organisation. What about the regional differences? If you compare what is happening in the north-east with some areas in the south where infection rates are not as high, how can we in England ask our children to do exams when some of those children, when the schools are open, have not been in school as much. Yes, they



HOUSE OF COMMONS

will be getting online learning but it is about Clem's point, there is still a lot of professional development work to be done about the quality of that online learning experience.

Nick Hurn: To reiterate what has been said there about the north-east, the Northern Health Science Alliance has just published a report this month that stresses that the north-east region has been hit the hardest out of all the regions by a country mile. That has certainly had an impact on the schools.

Back to your point about the hybrid system, I think a hybrid system could work. I don't agree that if the exams are removed students would just opt out. That would not be my experience either. I agree with colleagues on that. Whatever system we are dealt we will make it work. Although it might not work perfectly colleagues around the country will do their best to step up as they always do.

Q202 **Tom Hunt:** I do not think I have ever been called so quickly after requesting to ask questions. In terms of the exams, there are elements who would like us to turn our back on exams completely. Do you feel that there are some elements that may be using this to try to do that? Secondly, do you think there is enough of an appreciation that—I know often we look at exams as these nasty, stressful things—for many young people it is an opportunity for them to control their own destiny?

I say this as somebody who had dyspraxia, an unconventional learner who did not do particularly well in the classroom and who processed things in a slightly different way and I always pulled a rabbit out of the hat at exams. There are lots of kids at the moment in the same position who have things like dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism who usually do better at exams and having two academic years of no exams could disproportionately impact them negatively.

Claire-Marie Cuthbert: I could almost flick that on its head, Tom, and say there are some children that do really well on the run up to the exams but at the time of the exam they fall off the end. I come back to that argument around equity and fairness and what is the fairest and most just way to assess how well pupils have done during these very difficult times.

Ruth Robinson: I think overall for me exams are preferable, not now talking about the Covid-19 situation but going back to Tom's question. If you go back to the days where we had a lot of course work it disrupted teaching and curriculum. It was extremely challenging and a lot of focus went on getting the course work done and not on teaching content. The curriculum, teaching and learning have benefited and lessons now in Year 10 and 11 are richer, deeper and more challenging than they have been before. I think it would be regrettable if this saw us reverting to course work.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Nick Hurn: I agree with what Ruth said and also, Tom, we have a number of—and I choose my words advisedly—lazy boys who are very bright who do not do course work but always pull the rabbit out of the hat when it comes to exams. A lot of them have suffered on centre-assessed grades because staff have marked them according to how they have been performing and not their potential. I am one for exams, I am afraid. I think everyone should be tested at some point and it is something we just have to keep.

Helena Mills: I agree we keep exams long term but I think in the short term because of this pandemic we need to think about centre-assessed grades. My experience, Tom—and I am teaching the Year 11 GCSE group—is that boys like you have to work incredibly hard and if you were being educated in this pandemic you would not have been able just to wing it in the exam because, unlike last year's Year 11 who did not know, the current Year 11 know it might go that way so they are working harder.

Q203 **Tom Hunt:** To be fair this is not just about lazy boys. I was heavily dyspraxic at school and, I am sorry, as much as I might know it matters more for me to work hard in the classroom I just could not. I thought differently. If you have SEND you are a bit different and you process things differently so, to be honest, I think I would have suffered if I had been at school now if there had been no exams. As much as I told myself I have to buckle up and change my game in class, I knew I had to do it anyway, I just could not. I was better when I went away, revised, found my own weird ways of processing things and it worked in exams. But I take your point.

Helena Mills: We don't want to label you as a lazy boy, and I do not know about your schooling, but special educational needs is another area that should be discussed at some point. Schools are very good at making sure that children who have special educational needs are supported, not just in the exams but throughout the whole of their GCSE learning programme. That wouldn't be a worry for me, some of our children with special educational needs are being supported by their co-educators and there will be evidence of what they have done to support any grade.

Chair: Thank you, everyone. We are bringing it to an end. It has gone on much longer than it was supposed to but we could probably be here all day talking to you and tomorrow as well. A massive thank you, not just to the work you do but also your teachers and support staff as well because they are often forgotten. People always talk about teachers and not support staff. We will use your evidence for our inquiry and really appreciate your time today.