

Education Committee

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

Wednesday 12 January 2022

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Members present: Ian Mearns (in the Chair); Apsana Begum; Miriam Cates; Brendan Clarke-Smith; Tom Hunt; Dr Caroline Johnson; Kim Johnson; Kate Osborne; Nicola Richards; Christian Wakeford.

In the absence of the Chair, Ian Mearns was called to the Chair.

Questions 1180 - 1231

Witnesses

I: Mr Robin Walker MP, Minister of State for School Standards; and Graham Archer, Director for Education Recovery, Department for Education.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mr Robin Walker MP and Graham Archer.

Q1180 Chair: Good morning and welcome to the second session this morning of the Education Select Committee. As I pointed out earlier, sadly our Chair, Rob Halfon, is unwell and he has asked me to chair the session in his absence. This morning's session is an accountability session with the schools Minister. We welcome Robin Walker, Minister for School Standards, to his first session with this Committee. His predecessor Nick Gibb was a regular visitor, so we look forward to seeing you often in the future, Robin, and you are very welcome. We also have with us Graham Archer, director for education recovery at the Department for Education. Graham, you are very welcome. I think you were also a spectator at the previous session.

Graham Archer: I was indeed.

Chair: You are always welcome to do that. Good morning, everybody. First and foremost, what assurances can you give that schools will remain open for the remainder of the school year, Robin?

Mr Walker: This is an absolute priority for us. As you have heard from the Secretary of State already, we want to do everything we can to support schools to remain open. We have seen huge challenges, of course, and I am extremely grateful to school leaders and teachers for the immense amount of work that they have put in to keep schools open. We have seen some challenging levels of staff absence so far this year but slightly less than we had been projecting before the end of the year. We have seen 99.9% of schools remain open. We want to keep leaning into and supporting that.

We have taken a series of measures, whether we are talking about vaccination, ventilation or masks, to try to support schools to remain open in all circumstances. That is very much what we are focused on as a Department. I appreciate that members of the Committee will probably have different views on some of those, but we want to make sure that we are supporting schools. Clearly, that is not just about measures of that nature. It is also about leaning into attendance and making sure that we are supporting schools to have as many children in school as possible, recognising that there is some necessary absence because of the Covid situation, as you see on your own Committee, acting Chairman.

Against that, we want to put everything we can into prioritising the children who can be in school being there and getting the face-to-face education, which I think we have seen all the problems of not having in the earlier stages of the pandemic. That is not just about education. It is about mental health and socialisation, and that is why we are so determined to do everything we can to keep schools open.

Q1181 Chair: I think that everybody around the table wants to keep schools



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open. It is a question of where it is safe to do so, and a judgment comes as to how safe is safe. But I think that everybody has the same ambition to keep schools open. What threshold for infections does the Department have where it would consider it necessary to close schools?

Mr Walker: We haven't set a specific threshold. We have looked at various different scenarios of levels and we have seen schools managing extremely effectively to support themselves where necessary to reallocate staffing. Of course, there have been periods where some classes, because of very high levels of infection, have been sent home and there have been some decisions by local directors of public health. But so far we have seen extraordinary resilience in the school system and we want to do everything we can to support that, to lean into that.

That is why we reopened the Covid workforce fund, which runs until at least the February half-term. That is also why the Secretary of State made his call to arms to people who had left the teaching profession to come back in and support. We have published figures in the last couple of days on that, which I am sure you will have seen, that show that hundreds of people have responded to that. At this stage I don't want to set an arbitrary figure where we say if absence reached this level you would have to close down, because we want to continue to work with schools to make sure that they do everything they can to stay open.

Q1182 **Chair:** We accept that 450 or so people have volunteered to come back to teaching, but it is a drop in the ocean compared to the tens of thousands of teaching staff absences over the period. While it is all welcome, I think that we have to, as a Committee, and I hope that you would as the Minister, pay tribute to the leadership and the staff within the schools. I think they would move mountains to keep the show on the road.

Mr Walker: Absolutely, and I hope that I have made that point already. I think that the work that has gone into keeping schools open is phenomenal. I pay tribute to the work that teachers and school leaders in particular have done in this respect. I recognised coming into this job that in earlier stages of the pandemic sometimes the Department put out guidance at a time that perhaps burdened those people all the more. One of the discussions I have with officials regularly is how we can make sure that we are providing our guidance and information in as timely a manner as possible but also in a manner that does not hit people with a whole load of information just before a holiday, for instance. I think that we have learned from some of the challenges further back.

It is still a hugely challenging situation. As the Secretary of State has said, there will still be bumps in the road, but I think we have seen with the return to school an absolutely phenomenal performance by teachers, support staff and leadership in schools to make sure that they can be open and supporting as many pupils as possible. That is absolutely what we want to support and are continuing to do.



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Chair: I am glad that you said that, because a particular bugbear of mine is DfE consultation processes that seem to begin in the middle of July for some unfathomable reason, but there we go.

Q1183 **Miriam Cates:** I am hugely delighted that schools have reopened. Credit to teachers, obviously, but also to the Department, to you and to the Secretary of State. I think there was a real chance it was not going to happen so I am grateful for the push that was made to do that. It is so important for our children.

It seems to me that the political price that has been paid for that is the introduction of masks in classrooms. We know that those masks are not to protect children. Children are not at risk from Covid. I looked at the figures this morning and out of 150,000 deaths, 44 have been with Covid in under-15s and that is out of, sadly, over 3,000 deaths of under-15s in 2020. It is not to protect children. All teachers have had the opportunity to be triple jabbed, so it is only to reduce transmission. If we are going to force children to wear masks for six hours a day, the threshold of the evidence that it will reduce transmission has to be pretty high. We have the evidence summary that was published. Do you think that the evidence in there reaches that threshold?

Mr Walker: I think we have been straightforward and honest in publishing our evidence. I have some sympathy with where you are coming from. It is clearly not a cut-and-dried case to say that in all cases masks are going to be the solution. It shows that masks can make a difference in transmission, but where we are with the pandemic right now, and given the challenges of Omicron being a more highly transmissible variant, I think it is right to take every step that we can to reduce transmission, especially when that might lead to children being out of school. Yes, the threat of death is extraordinarily small, and we accept that, but of course anyone who has been killed by this virus is a tragedy in that age group. The risk of transmission is that that can, if there is higher transmission, keep children out of school, out of face-to-face education, and that is one of the factors we have to bear in mind when we are looking at this. We have to weigh that up.

I think the evidence that we published is also clear that there are disbenefits to education in communication and understanding for people wearing masks. That is one of the reasons why we have consistently said that we do not advise that the teacher at the front of class has to wear a mask. It is very important that people can take verbal cues in learning from their teacher in that respect. It is a finely balanced decision.

I echo what the Secretary of State said previously on this—that if we feel that this makes a difference to keeping schools open and keeping more children in school, it is a decision that we are prepared to take to support that objective and to keep children there. We will review it and I think it is very important that we do that properly. It is also very important that we continue to collect evidence as to the educational impact of children



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wearing masks in class. I recognise that there are real concerns about that from parents and some teachers.

Q1184 Miriam Cates: As I said, I support the overall aim to keep children in school but I think that, given the evidence of disbenefits, serious harms are being done to children. Sometimes there is a failure to put ourselves in the child's position. Imagine you are a year 7 child: the last two years of your primary school have been completely disrupted. You have had no residential; your parents have not been able to come in to watch the play; you have not had an induction day at your new secondary school; you have missed the first two weeks in secondary school because you were forced to do an LFT and had no symptoms but you had to isolate. Now you are being asked to cover your face for six hours. You are being asked to do work with your peers in class but you can't understand what they are saying. Some of your teachers do not know your name yet and now they cannot see your face.

I think the psychological impact of this, not to mention the fact that we are still indicating to children that they are causing risk and harm, is huge. Yet the evidence from this study is very thin, perhaps a 0.6% difference between schools with masks and without masks, but not controlling for other factors, not stating what the rates are at the start of the study, not making any distinction between schools that wear masks only in classrooms and schools that wear them in corridors. The evidence here is so thin and the document says that only a randomised control trial would provide proof. Are there any plans to do such a trial and would you be willing to suspend the use of masks, given their harm, pending that study?

Mr Walker: As the Secretary of State set out, our preference would be to be in a situation when we review this where we do not have to continue the use of masks in any case, so I think we must wait and see where we get to by the end of January with the development of the Omicron variant. In terms of a randomised control study, we set out in the evidence why that has not been possible and why that is not an approach that could be taken.

I accept the point that the impact is marginal, but if that impact, in a situation where we have both pupil and staff absence that is challenging, means that more pupils can stay in school and have face-to-face education I think most pupils would agree with us that that is a point worth taking. There has been polling of students in schools that suggests that the majority of students feel that masks are an annoyance, but an acceptable one, in order to make sure that they can be in school and continue their education. That is also something that we must bear in mind as we continue to look at this, but we want to improve the quality of our evidence base and we will absolutely continue to do that through this period. We have a period now where there is more mask wearing taking place in schools, and we need to continue to improve our data as well.



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One of the challenges you alluded to there is that when we had data on mask wearing through the EdSet information that we receive, that did not necessarily distinguish between the mask wearing in corridors and busy places, which we were advising previously, and mask wearing in class. Anything we can do to improve that would be helpful but what I have seen so far from schools is broad support for what we are doing, because they recognise that it helps them stay open at this stage and that is important. That is something we should continue to listen to; we should continue to engage with schools and their representatives and get their feedback.

Miriam Cates: I absolutely agree that the key factor here is keeping schools open. That leads me on to my next question—

Chair: Hold on, Miriam. Tom has a supplementary to your question.

Q1185 **Tom Hunt:** I take your point that the majority of pupils are probably okay with it, it is not the end of the world, and based on the conversations I have had with pupils that does not really surprise me. What concerns me is that that minority who really do not find it okay are often disadvantaged. Some of them are partially deaf, some of them have special educational needs, and my concern is that yes, they may be a minority, but there is a certain group of pupils who really do not like it and I wanted to know—

Mr Walker: I think it is really important that this is not a hard and fast law that says everyone at all times must wear a mask in the classroom. This is guidance. It is also clear that there are exemptions for people with special needs, and clearly in cases with people who might be hearing-impaired, for instance, there is a very strong case for masks not to be worn.

It is also where we have struck the balance, which not everyone likes and agrees with, but we do think that it is right that we say that teachers at the front of the classroom we do not advise to be wearing masks most of the time partly because of that issue. It is about the verbal cues that many students need.

Q1186 **Tom Hunt:** I have been thinking about this and I take your point about the guidance being that teachers do not have to wear a face mask. To be perfectly honest with you, I think it would be extraordinary if a teacher were to decide to wear a face mask and it would severely undermine the teaching and everything else. Is there an argument to say that there should be guidance that teachers do not wear a face mask and that the decision to wear a face mask by a teacher is clearly detrimental to education? The guidance could go further.

Mr Walker: Our guidance is clear that it is not what we advise. What we would not necessarily want to do is to put a hard and fast rule in for all cases. You might have someone who is particularly vulnerable, who is protecting a family member, who feels it is sensible to wear a mask for a



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period of time, and I think this is the point. We do not want to be overly draconian in setting the rules one way or another. We do not want to set something that says people must or must not wear masks at all times. We must accept that there is room for both teachers and students to take some of their own views on things and interpret the guidance sensibly. We have been very clear that no one should be excluded from a class for not being able to wear a mask or refusing to wear a mask. Equally, no one should be excluded from a class or from teaching for deciding to wear one. I think that is a fair balance to strike, at the end of the day, and that also comes back to the importance of this being guidance, rather than people from time to time describing it as a mandate. It is different in that respect to some of the mask mandates we have seen in other areas.

Q1187 Tom Hunt: I have a final question, very quickly. Maybe I am missing a trick here but are we aware of many examples of where we expect adults to wear a face mask continuously for such a long period of time? I understand, in things like retail, we are expecting it, but there is more opportunity for breaks and to nip out and take it off for a while. You are not at your desk for six hours a day. Are we aware of many examples?

Mr Walker: I am thinking off the top of my head of some working environments, such as transport workers who are in crowded spaces. I accept the point that it is a long time for someone to be wearing a mask. Of course, it should be possible for people to take them off at break time, to take them off when they are outside and so on and so forth. Yes, I recognise it is a lot that we are asking in that respect. It is important that there are proper exemptions in that respect and I think good teachers will recognise the benefits of children being able to get fresh air in between lessons and do what they can to support that.

Tom Hunt: It is a lot that we are asking for those young people, particularly when they are by and large not at risk of being seriously ill if they catch the virus and never have been.

Q1188 Dr Johnson: You will be pleased that I am not going to go over the arguments for and against wearing a mask and the marginal benefit it may or may not pose to the reduction in transmission. If you are going to do something you should do it properly, so what guidance do you provide to students on wearing the masks? It seems to me that you get a mask, and the one I have here has been in and out of my handbag and will be for most of the day and it was beyond its useful activity an hour or so ago already. Some of these children will be wearing the same mask all day or even all week. We know they lose effectivity pretty quickly. What guidance are you providing to children and parents about how long a mask should be worn for, how often it should be changed and such matters? What evidence do you have in that regard in terms of how long a mask will be effective for? We have heard from Tom they are wearing it for six hours a day. If they are wearing the same mask for six hours a day for most of the day it is not effective at all.



Mr Walker: It is a good point you make. The guidance on mask wearing comes from the Department of Health. It is not something that we produce. It is something that is driven from a public health perspective and there is clear guidance as to not wearing the same mask repeatedly over many days and also not handling and touching the mask too often. It is one of the reasons why we have drawn the distinction between pupils in secondary school and pupils in primary school, because we accept that, particularly for some of the younger pupils there, it is very difficult for them to wear masks properly and over a long period of time, and that is why we have not recommended masks in primary school settings in class.

I think what is important to note is, if we look at the evidence that we published for the decision that was taken to support mask wearing in our guidance for January, it was based on what has happened in real life in schools. The points you make about the lower effectiveness of masks, if they are not used properly, which I think are absolutely valid from a medical perspective, will be taken into account in those numbers, and that is probably why the impact on transmission is not enormous, because if masks were all being perfectly used all the time it might be greater. But there is a discernible impact there, and that is the basis on which we have taken the decision, supported by the relevant health bodies, to recommend mask wearing, particularly with the very high rates of transmission going on with Omicron at the moment.

Q1189 **Dr Johnson:** Do you provide that guidance to parents or is it done via schools, and if it is done via schools do you have evidence that the children are getting it? If children perhaps do not have the money to buy lots of different face masks are you providing them to change at lunch time or are you providing them for every day of the week? What are you doing to ensure that where you have put this imposition on children it is as effective as it possibly can be?

Mr Walker: I am not aware that the Department is providing or is involved in the provision of masks. There are masks that are readily available publicly. They are not expensive and people are using them to a wide extent. The guidance, as I say, belongs to our friends in Health and the public health space. I am happy to ask if there is further information we can usefully provide, but we are also wary of burdening schools with, frankly, too much guidance on some things.

Q1190 **Chair:** It is an additional cost, potentially, if we expect schools to provide them. Okay, they are not hugely expensive but if you use lots of them—and to follow the health guidance it would be lots of them—of course that is at a time when schools are also feeling the pinch on energy costs and a lot of other things.

Mr Walker: Yes, and I recognise there have been additional cost pressures on schools as a result of Covid. We have provided around £200 million specifically to address those things, but I recognise it is also one



of the factors when it comes to school funding that we need to take into account looking forward.

Q1191 Miriam Cates: Moving on to lateral flow testing, the Department's view has always been that lateral flow tests were introduced to keep kids in school. I think common sense would now say that it is the lateral flow test that is keeping children out of school. In testing asymptomatic children, so children who are well, finding that they are positive for Covid and then forcing them to take time off school, we are keeping tens of thousands of children out of school who otherwise would be in school if we were not testing asymptomatic children.

We were promised a review at the end of September of lateral flow testing. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health has come out and said that we should stop it, it is causing needless disruption, and there have been several moves over the weekend from the JCVI and others to move back to preventing serious disease and not transmission. When are we going to have a review of the lateral flow testing policy, and what is the evidence that it is keeping children in school rather than driving absence?

Mr Walker: The crucial missing element, if I may, in what you were saying there is that yes, of course, if someone has a positive lateral flow test, if they are asymptomatic, that could potentially take them out of school, but if it resulted in them not spreading the virus to many more pupils it could also keep many of their fellow pupils in school.

I think the point about where we are with testing now is that we have moved from a situation in which previously, earlier in the pandemic, clearly there were bubbles where when one person in a class tested positive there would then be a whole load of people who would be taken out. We have moved away from that. We have moved away from a situation in which people would take a lateral flow test and then have to take a follow-up PCR test and then wait for the requisite period of time. We have reduced the time when people can return. It is just the case of whether or not they are carrying the virus and then after they have taken daily lateral flow tests over a period of time they can return to school. We have reduced the amount of time that individual children must stay out of school for being Covid-positive. All of those things taken together will mean that more children can be in school and fewer will be out of it.

The challenge that we have now is that we do have a very high prevalence and a high level of contagion from the Omicron virus and that is why I think it makes sense to try to take preventive measures using lateral flow tests to keep children who might otherwise be transmitting to more of their classmates away from the classroom for as short a period of time as is reasonably possible. You will have seen all the debates about seven days versus five days and so on. If the scientific advice shows that five days is safe I welcome a move in that direction. It is something where we need to constantly look at what we can do to minimise the disruption from the virus.



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To your point about whether we want to try to pick up people who are asymptomatic, the vast majority of children probably will be asymptomatic if they are carrying the virus. Therefore, yes, we do because we want to avoid that becoming every child in the class, which would then cause greater disruption.

Q1192 Chair: Is there not a problem there, Minister, that unfortunately one of the things that we do not know and cannot be sure about is what the parents' vaccination status is? If children are passing the virus to one another they are going home to a situation where we do not know the parents' vaccination status and, of course, we do know that the parents of particularly primary school children are in the age groups where the vaccination rates are not as high as we would like them to be.

Mr Walker: That is a very fair point and also one of the reasons why we continue to recommend that all adults do get boosted, get their jabs, and continue to move forward on that basis. The evidence is constantly strengthening about the protection that vaccination and in particular boosters give you from serious illness, and that is something that we hope parents will take into account wherever possible.

We also recognise that there are going to be parents with different situations with regard to their vulnerability. That is something that we also must bear in mind when looking at schools. From that perspective keeping transmission of the virus down is important. It is the fundamental basis on which the decision to have masks for this period has been taken, and in that respect having very regularly available lateral flow tests has been a very useful part of how we can contest that. We have all seen, and I suspect all of us will have heard from constituents over the Christmas period about, some of the challenges of getting a PCR test quickly and effectively. Although there were some delivery challenges with lateral flow tests, I think they have remained much more regularly and freely available, and that is also part of the equation.

Q1193 Miriam Cates: To push back on that, the point of reducing transmission, Omicron is highly transmissible. While vaccines still absolutely protect against severe disease, the evidence is showing they are not stopping people transmitting Omicron to each other. The CMO has said we are all likely to catch it. If most children are asymptomatic, and I would be interested in the data on this, what is the point of preventing transmission? If we compare this to a standard childhood illness—a cold, a cough, a sickness bug—what we ask the parent to do is keep the child off while they have symptoms to reduce the likelihood of spreading, and then they come back when they are well enough to learn. If we move to that model for Covid, for Omicron, where if a child is sick they stay at home, and when they are well they come back to school, my guess would be that we would save an enormous amount of unnecessary absence and children continuing to receive disruption and potentially missing important lessons. We were promised this review at the end of September and I would like to know when we are going to get that



review. I would also be interested to know how much it is costing to perform all these lateral flow tests to the DfE.

Mr Walker: We did put investment into providing lateral flow tests for the testing on return programme for schools. The majority of the lateral flow testing that is taking place—and I think we have had 96 million tests registered over the course of the last year in lateral flow testing from schools—is, of course, through the public health route, so it is not a budget that we are responsible for in that respect. We did provide 31 million tests to schools for the beginning of term, and I am told also we did provide some face masks to schools at that point to help with these issues, but that is not designed to be a universal offer. Of course, this is just secondary schools we are talking about in the testing programme.

I think I have pointed out already some of the policy changes that have already taken place on testing, and I think some of those have moved in a helpful direction because they are allowing more children to stay in schools. The question about a review of lateral flow testing overall is one for health colleagues and is one I will certainly take away and discuss with them.

Q1194 **Dr Johnson:** Minister, I want to ask you about the vaccination programme in children. Before I do, I should mention for the record that I am a consultant paediatrician and a member of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. You know, because we have discussed it, that I was sceptical about the idea of providing vaccination to prevent educational disruption once it had been decided by the JCVI the benefit medically was considered marginal at best. Given that vaccines do not seem to have a particularly strong ability to reduce transmission in particularly the new variant, Omicron, which is the vast majority of cases now in the UK, is the vaccination programme still reducing educational disruption and are you monitoring that? If you are monitoring that, in what way are you doing so?

Mr Walker: First we must recognise that the vaccination programme is working at multiple levels. You have the vaccination of adults, which undoubtedly has a bearing on educational disruption because it will hopefully reduce the number of people who are getting ill and are out of the teaching workforce. We have vaccination that has been, on the recommendation of the JCVI, extended to children and secondary school children over 12, and then we have the specific additional element, which has not started yet, with regards to clinically vulnerable children under 12. All the evidence that we have seen on vaccination is that its biggest benefit is in reducing risk of serious illness and that is the most substantial benefit. That applies to all age groups where it has been used. Obviously, the risks of that for younger age groups are much smaller.

There has been a suggestion that it does have an impact on transmission. It is very hard to monitor that exactly because you are trying to prove a negative as to what would be happening if this was not in place. We do think that if the health experts on the JCVI have recommended



vaccination that is something we should support, and that is why we had a schools-based approach to that, supplementing the national community-based approach to vaccinations in secondary schools.

I have been working with health colleagues to try to make sure that we can maximise the pace of that, and the Committee, I am sure, will be aware that there have been some challenges, and some challenges with the roll-out of that. We want to keep working on that. We do want to make sure that as many people who are eligible for the vaccine as possible get it and get the follow-ups and the boosters.

This is something that we are not going to claim to be the experts on—on vaccination—at the Department for Education. We are going to follow the advice, we are going to listen to what the JCVI recommends, and in that respect I think we must support the vaccinations that they have recommended.

Dr Johnson: The original vaccination programme for 12-year-olds to 15-year-olds was not brought in specifically on the recommendation of the JCVI. The JCVI said on balance it was not recommending it but it would ask the CMO to look at the wider benefits, beyond health. The Chief Medical Officer then recommended on the basis of potential for reducing educational disruption that children aged 12 to 15 were vaccinated, which is a somewhat unusual decision. Normally, it is done on more of a health benefit directly to the individual being vaccinated, rather than the wider social benefits, perhaps.

We know that around half of children have taken it up and in many cases, talking to constituents, they have taken it up not because they think it is going to reduce educational disruption but because the only way they can go on their summer holiday, assuming we are able to do that, is to be vaccinated. It is being used as a travel vaccine, which is perhaps why you are seeing take-up in particular demographics higher than others.

Given that it was brought in to specifically reduce educational disruption, it surely is reasonable to look at whether it has reduced educational disruption. As half of kids have had it and half have not, there should be enough cohort of well-vaccinated, poorly vaccinated and somewhere-in-the-middle groups for educationalists to be able to make an assessment of the disruption that it has caused to schools, or not. It sits in the educational realm. Are schools that are close to 100% vaccinated seeing less disruption than schools that are not?

Q1195 **Chair:** Before you answer the question, I think I am right in saying that when the decision was made by the medical adviser, that was when we were dealing with the Delta variant and now we are dealing with the Omicron variant as the dominant variant. Should the DfE be asking them if they need to review their advice?

Mr Walker: The advice that I was referring to from the JCVI was subsequent. I think the advice that you are talking about was the previous advice, which had started the secondary age programme. On 22



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December the JCVI did update its advice and that is the point at which it advised extending to five-year-old to 11-year-old children and extending the booster programme to all at-risk 12s to 15s and all 16s to 17s. That was a further stage of advice from the JCVI on vaccinations and that is advice that the NHS is currently working on the implementation for.

That shows that the direction of travel has been that they do feel that the vaccines—in terms of measuring disruption, absolutely we do measure disruption very carefully. We look at it and we get very regular reports. As well as the published figures we use the EdSet data to try to monitor what is going on day by day as well in education settings. The challenge when you are saying, “Can you model this?” is that there is not, as far as I am aware, a school where there are 100% of people vaccinated and another one where there are 0% of people vaccinated. It is the case that because you have the combination of the schools-led vaccination service and the community settings, you have different rates in various parts of the country. Of course, we do not, therefore, have a control to say, “This is what would happen if you had nobody vaccinated” and to compare.

What we are monitoring very closely is the rates of infection and the rates of absence for both staff and students. What I have observed since the end of last year versus what we were told to expect is we have not seen the exponential increases in those that some people were predicting and expecting, which implies to me that the vaccination programme is making a difference. I am not a statistician and I am not going to claim that you can directly correlate those two points, but what we have seen from the JCVI, as you are quite right to correct me, before my engagement on this is it did make the recommendation that this should be considered by the CMO, rather than being something that it recommended straightaway, but it has moved from there to advocating further vaccination of the under-18s in its December advice.

With regard to the Omicron variant, if anything the case has strengthened for the importance of vaccination in protecting people, so I think from that perspective that is something that we need to heed and pay attention to and make sure that we are supporting.

Q1196 Dr Johnson: I would disagree inasmuch as if a variant is milder and has less effect on children and the vaccine has less effect of reducing transmission I would argue the case has gone the other way, but we may disagree on that.

You have groups of schools that have been better vaccinated than others, and I would be grateful if you could provide some information to the Committee about the effect that that has had on the absentee levels within schools.

Mr Walker: I am very happy to ask our teams to look at what we can provide on that and whether there is information that we can usefully provide. One of the challenges here, just to be very straight with the Committee, is that a lot of our anecdotal information on this comes from



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the EdSet data that we are not allowed to publish, and it is only ever partial. Only about half of schools provide it and they provide that on a day-to-day basis to us. The data that we can and do publish is around the census data and that tends to be much more partial, from time to time. I am very happy to go back to challenge our teams to look at that to see if there is anything further we can provide to the Committee on that.

Q1197 Kim Johnson: Good morning, Minister. The six national teaching unions have described the current situation as the perfect storm in terms of staff shortages, the lack of lateral flow tests and the poor response to air purifiers in schools, with only 7,000 being allocated, compared to an estimated 300,000 that are needed, and with the NEU saying that staff absences, pupil absences and teaching assistant absences have been greater in those areas of deprivation. I am interested to hear from you what you are doing in terms of air purifiers and what you are doing about staff shortages. We know that teachers have gone above and beyond over the last 20 months, not just with staff shortages but with providing community support in those areas of deprivation. We know that last week staff shortages were up to 44,000. We have heard today that 400 ex-teachers, retired teachers, have come forward to try to plug that gap. What do you think the Department has done in terms of looking at those teacher shortages?

Mr Walker: First, let me echo what you are saying about teachers going above and beyond, and not just teachers, but teaching assistants and support staff. Everybody in schools, I think, has done a phenomenal job to support children, and even more so in some of the areas where they need the support most, where I have seen some phenomenal work reaching out into the community. I absolutely agree with that.

With regard to the air purifying situation, it is important that we understand that, yes, there are hundreds of thousands of classrooms up and down the country, and it is correct to talk about over 300,000 and so on, but most of those are well ventilated, have access to fresh air and do not have the type of problems that would lead to increased transmission of the virus. In terms of what we have seen, and the reason for the 7,000 figure, we have sent out the CO₂ monitors—353,000 of those, and they can be moved from one classroom to another, so that covers even more spaces—and we have then monitored the number of places that are generating concerning returns from that in terms of the CO₂ level and, therefore, suggesting there is a challenge. We have gone back and discussed with those schools all the measures that can be taken in terms of ventilation and so on. That has reduced further the number of classrooms.

It is the ones where there is a persistent problem, where even despite doing what they can do in terms of opening a door or window or making straightforward arrangements to put things right there is a persistent problem, that led to our calculation of around 7,000 extra air cleaning devices on top of the 1,000 that we had already provided for special



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needs and AP settings. We are early on because it is 17 January when the window closes to apply for those devices, but so far we think that is about the right number to meet demand.

It is not a case that there are 350,000 classrooms out there that are desperately in need of these devices and would benefit from them. In fact, providing a device that does make noise, does require insulation and will cost some electricity to support to every classroom would be a very poor use of taxpayers' money but also could be disruptive and difficult for schools dealing with a very difficult situation.

I think there is a bit of a misunderstanding in how some of this has been portrayed, and in terms of our friends in the Liberal Democrat party in particular, who have been campaigning for one of these for every classroom, that would not be a good thing for schools or a good use of taxpayers' money. What is important is that we continue to engage and listen on this and hear concerns and try to address them where they are genuine.

I recognise that the unions have an important role to play in that, and we have been meeting them regularly throughout this period. We recognise we will not always agree on everything, but there has been some very constructive working on what can be done to support teachers and on how we can continue to make sure that we pay attention to workload through the work that we are doing in that respect and how we can ensure that one of the things to come from teachers' unions and headteachers' unions is the point I made earlier about guidance and how we can make sure that that is provided in as timely a manner as possible so that people can engage with it effectively. That is something that we are working hard to try to achieve.

I recognise also that amidst all of this, and having recognised and having said thanks for all the work that teachers and people in schools are doing, there will be a question about pay as well, and that is why I think it is very important that we do have a spending review settlement that allows us to look at that and to look at that properly for the first time in a while. That is something that there is important work to be done on, in this respect. Graham could probably expand more on the very regular engagement we do have with all the various unions as a Department.

Graham Archer: We meet pretty much weekly in several different forums with both headteachers and unions representing teachers. We hear and have had, I think, constructive and effective dialogue across the whole range of these issues. In my case I am mostly charged on the basis of education recovery, but I know that for our colleagues who deal with responding immediately and directly to Omicron and its predecessors that dialogue is one that is constructive, impactful and regular.

Q1198 **Kim Johnson:** In terms of staff shortages, because we know that there are regional disparities, what work has been undertaken by the Department to identify some of those issues across the regions and the



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impact it is going to have on pupils in those areas?

Mr Walker: That is a fair challenge. I should have said that when we monitor the data on attendance and we look at that on a daily basis and on a longer-term basis, we do so regionally. We work very closely with our regional commissioners on all of the information that is available at a local level on that front and, of course, local authorities have a very important role to play on attendance and work closely with us in that respect. That is something that is a real focus.

When it comes to staff, clearly the Covid workforce fund is there to provide for those schools facing particular challenges in this respect and also schools whose position in reserves may mean they are not able to easily fund supply. We recognised that needed to be stepped up and we put that in place. That is currently in place until at least the February half-term. I think that is important on the financial side.

In terms of the supply of teachers, that is exactly why the Secretary of State did make his call to arms before Christmas. I think you both did refer to a figure of around 400. I think it is 485 just through the supply network so far and there are a further 100 that have come through Teach First, so it is closer to 600, the figure so far. What we are hearing from the supply agencies themselves is that this is very early days and that they do expect more to come forward. I think we had one supply agency who said they had 150 people come to just them. I would also point out that is based on a survey that is only a proportion of the supply agencies in the system. I hope that we can improve that data by reaching more of them in time.

Q1199 **Chair:** Are you not also fishing from the same pool of people that you want to use for the tutoring programmes?

Mr Walker: That is an interesting point. Obviously, many of the people working on the tutoring programmes are not fully qualified teachers, so there will not be a complete overlap. What we have also seen is that some of those people who have been working particularly on the school-led group within the tutoring programmes have been able to provide some support and cover to colleagues within schools. It is not as straightforward as a direct competition, but I accept there are probably some pressures from the fact that we are recruiting on both.

Graham Archer: It is worth saying that we are actively encouraging schools who have tutors on their payroll, either academic mentors or through the school-led groups, to use them in support of teaching where that is necessary and makes most sense, where there are staff absences that require that, so we are clear about how schools should behave in that set of circumstances.

Mr Walker: The other point I wanted to make was on the issue of staff absences. What we have also seen is schools working together, particularly within MATs where they have been able to transfer staff



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sometimes to support schools facing particular pressures. I think that is one of the points that we are looking at in terms of the overall resilience of the system and how we can support that further.

In terms of the regional approach, as you will appreciate at earlier stages of the pandemic there has been a regional approach to infection control and that kind of thing. It has not always worked as well as people might have wanted so I do think it is important that we should continue to look very closely at what is going on on a regional and a local level, but we should try to make sure that our interventions are, wherever possible, across the piece.

Q1200 Kim Johnson: In terms of the staff shortages and looking to recruit, have you undertaken any kind of assessment of the number of staff that you are going to require nationally to meet the shortage?

Mr Walker: The challenge here is that staff absence is constantly changing and many of the staff who might be away this week might be back next week. We have more teachers in schools right now than we did five or 10 years ago—

Chair: And more pupils.

Mr Walker: More pupils, indeed, but it is not a situation in which there is an overriding shortage. It is a situation in which the Covid situation is creating specific pressures at specific times. That is something that schools have responded to extremely effectively so far. We want to support them to respond to that. That is why the Covid workforce is there, that is why we are trying to get more people into the supply system to support schools, but it is something where we want to make sure that they have the tools that they need to get through this difficult period and hopefully into a better period where we can return to the levels of workforce absence that we would expect in more normal times.

One of the interesting things and one of the hopefully positive signs from the early data that we have seen this year is that, while there is a higher level of Covid-related absence, there is a significantly lower level of other staff absence than there was at the end of last year and particularly in the run-up to the Christmas holidays. That also shows the dedication that teachers and teaching staff have to being in and playing their part in this, and I think that is something we should welcome and support.

Q1201 Christian Wakeford: Minister, in regard to the comment in relation to guidance, one of the biggest criticisms from teachers, mainly headteachers, during certainly the first year of the pandemic was the timeliness of the guidance, very often being released late on a Friday night to be implemented first thing Monday morning. In order to find that guidance they would have to read through the entire 40 pages for one line that had changed. What are we doing to not only improve the timeliness but to improve the guidance, to make it much easier to understand and, therefore, easier to implement?



Mr Walker: A fantastic question, and one on which I am constantly trying to make sure that we are improving and changing that. Both Nadhim and myself, on coming into the Department, recognised that this was something we had heard from local heads in our own constituencies, and I think we probably all heard it in one form or another over the last couple of years.

In fairness to our officials, they have always worked to try to get that information out as quickly as possible, and there is always that tension between providing the change as soon as it is delivered and providing it in the most effective form. One of the things that has improved is that more often we are now able to direct people and point people using highlighting or other methods to what has changed rather than trying to get them to read through tomes of literature. That is one of the things that has been picked up across the whole of Government as an issue, but it is part of our job as Ministers to be there to constantly challenge and say, "How can we get this to land on a date that will be more useful to schools and less disruptive?" That is something I am regularly doing and I am sure the Committee's interest in this issue will prompt myself and all my colleagues to do it even more.

Graham Archer: As a director, there is a little set of challenges that you are always subject to when you are making any change to guidance. The first is, of course: do you need to do this? There is nothing worse than frequently changing guidance on the margins, and you can very often trust schools, who are best placed, to decide for their children what they do. There is then what is the right timing, both in terms of influence and speed. There is something about whether you can package a set of changes together so that you have a single point of change. Then, of course, there is your point about signalling clearly what any change is. Regularly that dialogue happens within the Department, so I think we have learned a great deal through the speed at which things are moving and the challenges that poses for guidance.

Q1202 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Good morning, Minister, and good morning, Graham. With regard to the Government's catch-up programme particularly there has been criticism from some of the stakeholders—I am thinking of people like the ASCL and the EPI—that the Government have not made sufficient investment in that programme. How would you respond to their criticism?

Mr Walker: This is a hugely important area and is a key priority for the Department. That is why in our spending review bid we put in for a substantial increase—£5 billion overall is not a small amount of investment, and the £1.8 billion extra that we achieved in the spending review will make a real difference.

Of course, I recognise the sector is always going to want more and, frankly, as an Education Minister I would always be happy with more, but we need to make sure that, where money is invested, it is used effectively and is well targeted. I know that this Select Committee has



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always taken a real interest in supporting deprived pupils and making sure it is targeted towards those areas. That is what we have done with the recovery premium; that is what we have done in elements of the NTP, which are skewed towards disadvantaged cohorts. I think it is important that we continue to target effectively and also to learn.

With regard to catch-up and in particular the tutoring programme, one of the things that has perhaps not received as much press attention as some other aspects of it is the fact that we listened to schools—in fairness, it was my predecessors rather than me—when they said, “We want more control of this. We want to be able to do more of this in school and there is a real value to having tutoring where the people know the schools.” That is why we created the schools-led pillar of the tutoring programme, which is a huge success and is the biggest chunk of the figures that have just been published, with 200,000 student interactions driven by that pillar, because schools are seeing the value in that.

I think listening and adapting is important. Overall, the fact that we have had as many engagements through the NTP in a term as we did in the previous year is progress. It shows there is movement on a trajectory. Of course, there is further to go and I know you spoke to Randstad about that earlier. We want them to go further and faster on this.

Catch-up is making a difference and some of the figures that we have seen from Renaissance Learning show that the gap is closing with children who had fallen behind. I have seen some amazing examples in schools of use of recovery premium and also of the academic mentors and schools-led tutoring making a difference for children on numeracy and literacy and making sure that children can catch up effectively. I am thinking of Burnett Fields Primary School in Durham, where I saw academic mentors at work, and a school I more recently visited in Kent. Some of the good work going on in that space we need to make sure reaches more children across the piece. It is a big priority for the Department. Graham has been closely involved in all the detail of this. I do think we took a significant step forward at the spending review with regard to that £1.8 billion uplift on the overall budget for catch-up.

Q1203 Chair: Have you sent an email to schools asking them to more regularly open their e-mails?

Mr Walker: I think that might be a self-defeating prospect. We all recognise some of the pressures that schools are under at the present time. What we absolutely want to make sure is that schools are aware of the offer. The polling suggests there is a good level of awareness of the offer. What we saw in previous years, which I am hoping we will also see in this year, and with the first year of the tutoring programme in particular, is take-up picking up towards the exam season, perhaps not surprisingly. There is a logic that that should also happen particularly with the tuition partners pillar of the NTP as we head towards that.



Graham Archer: That is very much the case. We are, in broad terms, where we would expect to be overall on tutoring at this stage of the game. It is a new programme. The school-led pillar is a new pillar and there is something about schools understanding how the various pillars interact and maximising the use of those across the piece. I want to see particularly the tuition partners pillar and the academic mentors pillar accelerate sharply through this term. We are working very closely, as I know Karen said in the session before this, with Randstad to make sure that its engagement with the schools and the simplicity and the clarity of what it is doing is improved. I think we are not, overall, in a bad place when you look at last year and you look at the nature of the programme, but there is a huge amount of work still to do to make sure that we can deliver on the numbers that we are aiming for for the programme.

Q1204 **Chair:** Given what we know about what occurred last year and what is already occurring this year, is there not an element where the Department needs to look at catch-up for lost catch-up from last year?

Mr Walker: That is a constant challenge that disruption in schools is continuing, and we need to absolutely support them to be supporting as many pupils as possible. It is also why it is so important that we have kept our focus on keeping schools open and keeping as many children in schools as possible, because that avoids another layer of catch-up upon catch-up upon catch-up. I think it is really important that we do that. Of course, there is also the continuing support for remote education for those children who must be out of school for a period of time. That is important but, as we all know, it is no substitute for face to face.

Q1205 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** If I could just follow up, Minister, and I think you have touched on this a little, in terms of reaching those who are the most in need, if subsequently we see the results are not quite what we expect, what plans do we have to adapt and shift in that sense to make sure that we do hit where we want to be?

Mr Walker: There are some tweaks and changes that have already been made in that respect. Within the tutoring programme we have focused the academic mentors pillar more on disadvantaged pupils and broadened the net of schools that are eligible to engage with that on the basis of disadvantage. The recovery premium is allocated according to pupil premium standards, and what we have said to schools is that we want them to use their discretion to focus on the students who most need to catch up.

To be honest, this is also an important part of what we do through the rest of the school system, which is not catch-up per se. On pupil premium, for instance, I pushed very hard to make sure that we would get an inflationary increase in that with the spending review so that it is at its highest level in 10 years. There is about £6 billion of what we put through the NFF that is targeted at disadvantage in various forms, whether that is low prior attainment or disadvantage per se. This is an absolute priority and something that we want to continue to press. What



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we have seen since 2010-11 is a steady closing of the disadvantage gap in schools. That has been offset by the pandemic and we want to make sure that we get back on track with that, because that is something that we want to continue to drive and make sure that we can see further progress on. This is a key element of what we are doing through catch-up, both through the NTP and through the additional funding through the recovery premium.

Graham Archer: Tutoring is, of course, an entirely new element in large parts of the system and one that has hitherto been the province of only those who can afford to provide tutoring, so providing tutoring in large amounts in schools funded and targeted to those with disadvantage is a large step towards tackling some of those gaps.

Mr Walker: The other thing that is worth pointing out is that when we talk about disadvantage it means different things in different contexts. There is a real focus on SEN within that and on making sure that there is more funding to support students with SEN and to allow for one-on-one tutoring in that space, which I think is really important.

Chair: There are a number of follow-up questions. Christian, Tom and then Caroline.

Q1206 **Christian Wakeford:** Minister, you mentioned the elephant in the room—exams. At the moment, exams are going ahead, and I sincerely hope that is still the case. This is to be reviewed on 7 February, so I have a few very brief questions. How do things look at the moment, as in are they still likely to go ahead if the data stays as is? Have plans started to be formulated if we do need to go to a contingency? Is the decision date too late? Are those plans being communicated with school and college leaders now, as opposed to implementing them with very little notice?

Mr Walker: Very fair questions. We absolutely do want exams to go ahead. That is where we are focused, and where things currently stand we think they will and should go ahead. What we are seeing right now in schools is the January series of qualifications being undertaken and about half a million entries going through tests and exams over this period in January, which I think gives good confidence that they can go ahead later in the year and that the infrastructure is there to support them. That is absolutely our central assumption and what we are working to, but you are right to point out that there has been contingency.

In terms of the characterisation of the February date, I do not see that as a date for reviewing whether exams should go ahead. Clearly, that is something we should keep under review all the time but we should focus on making sure that they do. What the 7 February date is about is the publication of advance information, and it is important to set that in context. We took a number of steps to recognise the disruption that the pandemic has caused and to therefore make sure that exams, as and when they do go ahead, can do so in as fair a way as possible to students. That involved talking about aides for some specific subjects,



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and advance information for a large proportion of subjects, so that revision can be focused.

The reason why the 7 February date was landed on was we wanted to ensure that there was the maximum breadth in curriculum teaching and we did not want to restrict teaching across the piece. We agreed with Ofqual, with the expectation that there would be significant disruption in schools this year, that 7 February would be an appropriate date at which to provide the advance information and allow for a revision to focus on those issues, but not having narrowed the teaching of the curriculum in the run-up to that. That is why we landed on that date and I think that is the right date to stick to, recognising the disruption, as we suspected it would be when we reached that decision, to be quite significant.

That is where, on all of your questions, my assumption and the Secretary of State's, and what the schools should work to, is that exams are going ahead this year. We do want to make sure the appropriate adjustments are in place, with advance information, with the aides that I mentioned earlier. When it comes to grading we recognise that it would not be fair to students who have faced significant disruption during the run-up to GCSEs or A-levels to simply flick a switch and return to 2019 grading standards. We think there should be a two-step process that acknowledges the disruption that has taken place. That is the approach that we are taking.

Of course, contingencies must remain in place. One thing we have learned through this saga with the virus is that things change. In that respect, yes, there is work on the contingencies and we have been working closely with Ofqual on what would need to happen if we had to go through a process of teacher-assessed grades this year. It is not what we want to happen; it is not what I think anyone wants to happen, and I have been getting increasing feedback from teachers and teachers' representatives, including the unions, that they do not want it to be the case either. It is something that is right that we have it worked up as a contingency, but our focus is very much on providing that advance information in February and then exams going ahead this summer.

Q1207 Tom Hunt: Regarding disadvantage, of course it is right that the tutoring programme, the catch-up programme, has a laser-like focus on disadvantage. We have seen huge amounts of data about how those from deprived areas seem to have been particularly badly affected by this. I was reassured by a comment you made just a few answers ago about special educational needs. I am also encouraged by the fact that I believe that half of the providers who are involved in the tutoring programme have a background in SEN support. Do you think it has worked well? Do you think the tutoring programme has worked well for those with special educational needs, from what you have seen?

Also, I know that the SEND review is outside your area, but we know it has been much delayed. I guess one of the benefits from its delay might be that what we have learned from the catch-up programme and what we



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are learning from the tutoring programme can be fed through into the SEND review. To what extent are those conversations happening to make sure that the experience through Covid of those with learning disabilities influences the SEND review and can make it a stronger document than it may have been if published earlier?

Chair: Before you answer, I think the crucial point—I obviously want you to answer Tom’s question—is what data you are collecting about this and about what impact it is having. I think we need to have that understanding.

Mr Walker: I absolutely accept the point and this is an area where I work very closely with Will Quince. When it comes to the SEND review he is the one holding the pen on that. I think your point is a very fair one in that we need to make sure that the lessons of the pandemic and its impact on SEN pupils is fed into that and that we continue to target the support in a sensible way that works for SEN pupils—both SEN pupils in mainstream schools and those in a specialist system. One of the challenges is that sometimes people can think of SEN interventions as primarily about special schools, but of course the majority of SEN pupils are not in special schools. The majority of them are in the mainstream system and we need to be able to support both and do it effectively.

Q1208 Tom Hunt: Many of those with special needs who are in a mainstream setting do not have EHC plans and may never have one, but they still have learning disabilities and they may well have struggled throughout the pandemic.

Mr Walker: Apologies for leafing through my pack, but I have some specific information about some of the ways in which we have targeted support to SEN, which may be worth running through. We have been providing additional uplifts for those who attend specialist settings, including special units in mainstream schools, in both the catch-up premium in the 2021 academic year and the recovery premium for 2021-22, and then going forward it will also be in the recovery premium. I think that is roughly three times the level of premium that is provided for other students.

Special alternative provision schools will also receive additional funding to receive one-to-one tutoring, which I mentioned earlier. They received an uplift to deliver summer schools and had the flexibility to deliver provision based on pupils’ needs. There is the 16 to 19 tuition fund, which also continues to support students with SEND through small group tuition in a more targeted way. On top of that I think one of the most important things in the spending review, even though it is outside my brief, and one of the things I was particularly celebrating, was the £2.6 billion in capital funding for high needs, because I think we all know from our constituencies that that is very much needed and can make a difference. Importantly, it can make a difference both in mainstream schools and in specialist settings, and I hope that we will see more detail on it in due



course that will show that it will support more bases in mainstream schools.

Graham Archer: I just want to do 30 seconds on NTP specifically. We have worked really hard to make sure that we have tuition partners who can work effectively with pupils with special educational needs. That was also one of the things where schools said to us they wanted that bit more control. They felt they could bend the provision in a way that worked best for their pupils, particularly those with special educational needs, so that is another reason why we brought in the school-led groups. I think it is a bit early to say what the impact of that has yet been, but that is definitely part of the reason for that shift.

Q1209 **Tom Hunt:** I have a final question. We know that funding is very important when it comes to SEN, but so is diagnosis. I was going to veer off a little bit. You will be acutely conscious of my role and of the MP for West Sussex's campaign to get every primary school child diagnosed to see whether they have dyslexia. Do you have any thoughts on that, and whether we could turn that into a reality?

Mr Walker: I have already met him to discuss it, and it is something that I am keen to explore. I think it is really important that we have a focus on literacy, making sure that we provide the right support to dyslexic children, and supporting that is a crucial part of recognising the importance of these issues. I cannot give you a policy commitment on the specific Bill that he is putting forward at this stage, but it is certainly something that we will continue to engage on. I am very keen that we find the right solutions for supporting literacy for all different types of students, recognising that not everybody learns in the same way.

Q1210 **Tom Hunt:** I am not going to get the violins out, but it was only when I was diagnosed as a 12-year-old with dyslexia and dyspraxia that things changed for me. I think if we are going to diagnose for dyslexia we may as well diagnose for dyspraxia and we may as well diagnose various types of disabilities that are perhaps more hidden than others.

Mr Walker: That is an interesting point. The broad point as well is that EHCPs are extremely important and making sure that we get the right support for the right people, but of course not every condition generates them. From that perspective it is an important part of the system. I have a brother who was diagnosed with dyslexia aged about 16, by which time he had taken half of his exams, so I recognise the issue.

Q1211 **Dr Johnson:** I have a quick question. Again, for clarity, I should mention I have three children in key stages 1, 2 and 4. What are you doing to help the smaller children with catch-up particularly? We know those particularly in year 2 have had reception and year 1 disrupted and this is important foundation time—building blocks, basic reading—which helps them to access more of the wider curriculum later on. They also require more directive parental or teacher attention in order to work online. They cannot self-supervise their own online working, so it has been much more



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difficult for those children. I have seen evidence that suggests that those children in year 2 particularly have fallen behind more than others. I want to know what you are doing to help those young children catch up, please.

Mr Walker: Primary schools are a very important part of the catch-up work, and indeed some of the very good work I have seen personally with NTP has been in primary schools, so it is making sure that schools have the resources they need to benefit. It is £145 per eligible pupil in primary schools that they get as additional support in that respect, plus the fact that the schools-led route has been particularly useful for primary schools because the children often want to have someone they know who they are working with. I think that has been one of the areas where taking on board that learning, and recognising that that tuition partners route could work in some cases but might not work as well for some of the primary schools, where the children wanted to have that direct knowledge of their teachers, was why we expanded that route. It has been very important.

I don't have the right figures in front of me so, apologies, I am going to extemporise. There is some evidence that primary schools have caught up faster when it comes to reading and maths. I think the resilience of young children and their capacity for learning feeds into that, as well as the excellent work of teachers who are focused on those areas. We want to support that; we want to continue that. Again, whenever we are providing guidance, advice, the approach, we have to make sure we have something that works for different phases.

I appreciate you don't agree with me on some aspects of mask wearing, but I am sure you do agree that it is right not to be advising it in primary schools. It is part of the reason why we have taken that differential approach, and we do want the primary school children—bearing in mind the difference in the risks and so forth—to have the maximum ability to learn, including from facial cues. Primary is a key priority as part of this, as it should be. I think children have shown incredible resilience so far and they have been well supported through catch-up, but it something we have to continue to invest in.

Q1212 **Dr Johnson:** Will you be doing key stage 1 and 2 SATs this year?

Mr Walker: Yes. We think that they should go ahead. What we will not be doing is publishing league tables for key stage 2 SATs. Given all the challenges that people are facing, that probably isn't helpful in this environment, but they will be going ahead and we think it is sensible that that support is there for schools and for the accountability system.

Q1213 **Dr Johnson:** You will be publishing results, but not on an individual school basis. Is that right?

Mr Walker: We will certainly be analysing the results and using them within the system. I think it is the publishing of results that won't be



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going ahead, because we think that it is reasonable in the circumstances to accept that they are not going to be published and compared.

Q1214 Dr Johnson: Just to be clear, there is a difference between not publishing individual schools and saying, "This school has this result and that school has the other" and not providing a greater level of awareness of where children are at as a cohort. It is your intention that none of the results are published?

Mr Walker: I would have to clarify on that front. I think the point we have made is that we will not be creating league tables of primary schools on the basis of KS2 results. Clearly, there is important data to be monitored in terms of progress for students, which this can feed into, but that is not data we go out and publish in that sense. That is the distinction that I would make. Graham can correct me in any way on that.

Graham Archer: That is exactly right. We absolutely need to have the information that you have described to understand where children are in catch-up terms. At the moment we have sampling and incomplete evidence in terms of subjects and so on, so we absolutely want to use that evidence as far as we can, but the point the Minister makes about league tables in individual schools is very important.

Q1215 Apsana Begum: Good morning. I have a question about the Welsh Government's proposals and plans that they are undertaking in the spring term with the trial of additional school hours. Is the Department planning to do anything similar, given the evidence that suggests that it may benefit disadvantaged pupils in particular?

Mr Walker: We did do an evidence review, which was published in November, on extra time in school and hours, and we recognise that extra time can make a difference. The key challenge here going into our spending review bid is we wanted to have the clearest evidence-based approach to where it would make a difference and where it would deliver the most effect versus other interventions, such as the recovery premium.

What was clear from the evidence that we gathered was that the biggest impact on extra time would be at the 16 to 19 phase, where students have the least time to catch up in their studies and also where, by comparison to other international peers, we are providing less face time in education than many of them. That is where there was a specific element of the recovery funding that we have that we put towards increasing by 40 hours the teaching time in the 16 to 19 space and the provision in that space.

Within mainstream schools and within the four to 16 space, we felt that there were more targeted and effective , with regard to recovery premium and the tutoring programme, which would give us more bang for our buck, if you like, with regard to supporting students. But the



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Secretary of State has also said that there is a variation in schools across the country in terms of time, and what we would like to see is those schools that are currently below the average of six and a half hours moving up to that level because I think it is important we recognise time in school is important. There are some great examples around the country of schools that are going well beyond that and, absolutely, we would encourage schools to explore that both in terms of curriculum time and lesson time and in terms of extracurricular activity that can support children being in school.

Q1216 Apsana Begum: The question is outside of the 16 to 19 year-old group. The Department obviously published the research report with the interim findings of the school recovery strategy. One of the things that has come up for primary schools is them saying that the most common challenge was the large differences in progress between pupils, so that is talking about disadvantaged pupils. How do we get that buy-in to have that support for them and to target disadvantaged pupils, but also to make sure it is available for pupils outside of that 16 to 19 year-old bracket?

Graham Archer: I think the clearest evidence that I saw in that respect was saying that the impact was less about time per se, and more about how you use time most effectively. I think the package of measures that are in the catch-up programme or the recovery programme speak to that—so tutoring evidenced to drive catch-up and skewed to disadvantaged pupils, as well as teaching and the importance of the quality of teaching, both in schools and in early years, a sort of CPD programme, which will be very important to driving that quality.

Then, catch-up and recovery premia, which we want to see used on evidence-based and evidence-effective programmes within schools, also skewed in funding terms to disadvantaged pupils. The route that we have taken in response to the evidence is to take those particular packages. As I say, these are the things that we think schools should prioritise in driving catch-up.

Mr Walker: It is a very important point, but of course it is open to schools to use some of those premia to provide extra time and to provide extra classroom time. Also, to Graham's other point, which has prompted me, one of the best and most effective things that we can spend money on is quality of teaching and investing in quality of teaching. I think the work that is being done through both ECF and NPQs makes a real difference. The evidence is that that makes the biggest difference to the most disadvantaged pupils. Those pupils who start from a level of disadvantage have the most benefit from having high-quality, evidence-based teaching approaches in terms of being taken forward. That is why I think some of the work that we have been doing with EEF to keep analysing and keep providing a deep, rich evidence base on what works and what makes a difference is so crucial, as well as some of that ongoing investment in CPD for the teaching profession.

Q1217 Apsana Begum: Can I ask a follow-up? In terms of the evidence that



you have seen work well in other places, I am not a big fan of the international correlations and comparisons because I do not think they fit quite with the UK education system that we have, but the good examples have been where things have been implemented in a way in which they are integrated in a school, with headteachers having flexibility in terms of how things works for a particular school, for a particular area. In terms of any innovative approaches that have been considered for incorporating enrichment alongside educational activities, catching up in maths and literacy and other areas, is that being looked at in terms of evidence and what works well with catch-up and recovery?

Mr Walker: Yes, absolutely. Enrichment is a very important part of this because part of the changes to the Ofsted inspection framework that went through were looking at the richness of what children get taught in school and trying not to focus exclusively on the data and the numbers of what goes on, but to challenge schools on how they are providing a rich curriculum. We are doing lots of interventions around the curriculum—supporting music hubs, for instance, around the work that they can do. There is some work on PE to make sure that we understand the importance and the benefits that that can provide.

Of course you are absolutely right that the people who are best placed to determine what is going to work in their schools are often the school leaders themselves, the teachers in those schools. That is why we have designed successive premia, and the latest version of that is the recovery premium, in a way that gives them discretion over how and where the money gets spent, but of course we want that to be evidence-based. When we are asking the Treasury for money, we also have to be evidence-based ourselves. That is where I think some of the work that people like the EEF are doing to provide a very strong evidence base for this is so important.

Q1218 **Chair:** Have you any concerns, particularly with schools with exam groups, that the catch-up premium might be used to support particular students, for instance, C/D borderline exam prospects, as opposed to those in receipt of pupil premium?

Mr Walker: Obviously, the allocation method is taking into account how we target pupil premium, but I think it should be within the discretion of schools to work out which pupils are going to get the most benefit from interventions. I think there is a difficult balance to strike there. If we are too prescriptive in saying, "You must not do this," or, "You must do this approach," then we risk taking away from that important element of agency for both teachers and leaders in schools, which I think it is important to support and to preserve. We do want to keep pushing towards the evidence-based approaches and that is why we have taken the approach of referencing some of the work that EEF has done in this respect. I also know Ofsted is particularly tough on teaching to the test. I know from my discussions that it does not like schools that teach to the test and it will generally seek to call that out if it sees it.



Q1219 **Chair:** If I can make an observation concerning resources being spent on evidence-based approaches, we have to have a much better systematic approach towards collecting evidence.

Mr Walker: That is an interesting point and I think that is one of the reasons why, rather than having a huge variety of different organisations that look at these things from different angles, having a really strong repository in the evidence base with something like the EEF has made a real difference in that respect.

Graham Archer: I wonder if I could just plug the Accelerator Fund, too. That is part of the recovery package, which is intended to scale up some of those evidenced impacts.

Q1220 **Kim Johnson:** Minister, the Northern Health Science Alliance has just produced a report called “Child of the North”. It estimates that the costs of mental health conditions to a child in the north are likely to be something in the region of £13.2 billion. Has the Department undertaken any assessment in terms of the increase in mental health conditions? What resources and funding is the Department likely to provide to schools to meet the needs of both pupils and staff going forward?

Mr Walker: Yes, we have. Working with health colleagues, we constantly monitor the prevalence of mental health. I haven’t seen the report you refer to, but I will look at it with interest and I am certainly happy to take that on board. We have seen an increase in prevalence and it is clearly a concern from that perspective. Clearly, this is covering a very wide range of different conditions and different issues that people may be facing and, therefore, there is no one-size-fits-all approach that will work for this.

I think I am right in saying that last year the Department announced around an £80 million investment in mental health in schools. There has been some further support in announcements since to target mental health support, particularly to school leaders who we recognise have been under huge pressure during this time, and to expand the number of mental health support teams who are available in schools to, I think, cover about a third of schools nationwide. That is a start, frankly. I think we all know we would like to go further on that front. That is something that I think we have to keep looking at.

One of the crucial points here and one of the learnings from earlier stages of the pandemic is the fundamental importance to children’s mental health of children being able to be in school. That brings me back to where we started here, around why we are making that a priority, why it is a good thing. When the Children’s Commissioner did her Big Ask, children came forward and said, “We really want to be in school and we want to have those opportunities.” That is an important factor that we need to keep bearing in mind.

The other point I would make on this is that behaviour—we haven’t touched much on behaviour, and I am not sure we will have time to



now—is a very important aspect of this. One of the things that particularly children suffering from any kind of mental health condition are much more susceptible to is being disrupted and upset by other children's behaviour, so a strong culture of behaviour in schools is a very good thing for supporting positive mental health for children and making sure that those people who may be going through a tougher time can have an easier time in school. It is one of the reasons why we are making that a real priority as well, supporting good behaviour, positive cultures of behaviour in schools, which can then help those children who are undergoing mental health challenges to be able to enjoy their time in school and feel safe and feel under less pressure.

Q1221 Kim Johnson: Sadly, you talk about behaviour, and those children who do have SEND do have behavioural problems and often are at a high risk of being excluded. If children and young people are excluded from school, that again exacerbates their mental health condition. It is about how those behaviours are dealt with and how teachers and support staff in schools are better able to meet the needs of those children in schools to prevent the high incidence of exclusions.

Mr Walker: I would absolutely accept that part of managing behaviour effectively is making sure that people can take into account the mental health needs of the children and any special needs that children might have. You are right to point out that within the very, very small number of exclusions that we do have in the system—I think it is 0.02% of children—there is a higher prevalence among those areas, but the vast majority of special needs children will not be excluded, will not be at risk of any exclusion, and need the support of a strong behaviour system to protect them and to protect their time in school.

We recognise permanent exclusions are a necessary tool for schools, but not one that anyone should ever use lightly. They should always be a last resort. What we want to do is make sure that we have behaviour guidance that makes clear all the other steps that can be taken and that makes clear that these are a necessary tool in some exceptional cases but should not be used the rest of the time.

I think Ofsted has also done some very important work in this respect on off-rolling and some of the concerns around that. Again, the same issue arises. I know from my own constituency experience that there are too many cases where parents of children with special needs feel that they have to take them out of school, and they may never have been excluded, but they end up outside the school system. That is something that I am very keen that we work hard to put right to make sure that we have a system that supports children of all types, from all backgrounds, for the better. That is something we are doing some long-term work on as well.

Q1222 Chair: There is a workforce planning issue inherent within that. I am afraid to say I go back long enough to when I chaired a sub-committee of a committee of the Local Government Association, which was called the



Education Client Side Group, which was managing the top-slicing arrangements for the training of educational psychologists. That no longer exists, and I think that is a significant workforce shortage, which impacts on the diagnosis of educational needs among an awful lot of youngsters—the diagnosis and then the preparation of those education, health and care plans. If there aren't enough educational psychologists, either you change the system or we have to have more educational psychologists.

Mr Walker: I think improving diagnosis in that respect has to be a priority. It is something that obviously we need to liaise with health colleagues on to make sure that the system is supporting that effectively, but again, I think we all recognise some of the challenges from CAMHS over the last few years. That is something we absolutely do need to address. I think what we are looking at, obviously, from the DfE perspective, is what we can do within schools to support that. That is where there is some investment specifically in mental health interventions we are making, but it is also about making sure that we are supporting schools that have the best culture that can support the diversity of pupils that they are dealing with.

Q1223 **Dr Johnson:** I want to ask a couple of questions about the curriculum, in particular in secondary schools. In 2015 the chief inspector did a report, "Key stage 3: the wasted years?" which highlighted relatively slow progress in that particular phase of education and also a lack of challenge given to the more able pupils and an acceptance that things will be recapped over those few years as they worked out that all the children from the various feeder primary schools had covered all the material they wanted them to cover, rather than pushing those who had already learned it forwards. It also cited that as a reason that children did not do as many modern languages at GCSE. What have you done to change things since then? If the inspector went and wrote a report now, do you think you would get a similar report or a much better one?

Mr Walker: This is a very interesting space because we have a lot of debate in the education space constantly about the importance of testing and those who believe it is a good thing and those who believe it is a bad thing. Of course, key stage 3, because of the decisions that were taken by previous Governments, is one area where we don't have very much of it. There should be an opportunity in that and there should be a real opportunity for schools to teach a breadth of curriculum.

One of the things I did when I first became a Minister in this Department is to study some of the curriculum resources that the Department provides, some of the guidelines and so on. If you read the key stage 3 history curriculum, it is fascinating and it has huge breadth and huge opportunity to be taught. The problem, and I think what Ofsted correctly identified, is that in many cases schools have not been looking to provide that breadth and richness, which it is open to do at that stage, but start preparing people for key stage 4 exams. I think that is where it is right that they take very seriously this issue of teaching to the test and don't



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encourage it and do step in and look at the breadth and richness of the curriculum that is being applied by schools.

To your point on languages, this is an area I am particularly concerned about, I have to say, because if we look at the EBacc, I think by and large it has been a success and has driven uptake of academic subjects, particularly for the most disadvantaged pupils, where uptake of the EBacc has more or less tripled over the last 10 years. However, the one pillar where we are not seeing the progress that we should be is languages. I think that is a real long-term challenge and one that we need to address. There are some steps being taken with regard to, obviously, the subject content review that Ian Bauckham has been undertaking for GCSEs to make sure that they are more accessible, and it is absolutely crucial and very important that we can address that.

I am interested in whether there are further steps we can take to support the uptake of languages, particularly at that earlier stage, languages at primary, which are a core part of the system, but not necessarily every school has the resources to support and provide them, and also at key stage 3, making sure that children have the opportunity to become comfortable in a language before they are then put into a situation where they are preparing directly for an exam in it. There is definitely more work that can be done on this space. There is some very exciting work.

Acting Chair, I did a visit in your own constituency to the Cardinal Hume language college, which was—

Chair: I declare an interest. I am a member of the trust board.

Mr Walker: Indeed. They were singing your praises when I was there. It is doing some great work with the national centre on language proficiency to look at phonic space teaching of languages and making languages more accessible. It was very exciting to see some of what it was doing with French and Spanish pupils. I would love to see that rolled out more broadly, and I think some of the work that we are doing with MFL hubs can help on that. But if there is one area on the EBacc where we have a real challenge, it is on languages. I think you are absolutely right to highlight that doing more at key stage 3 could make a big difference in that respect.

Q1224 **Dr Johnson:** Particularly the other thing that was picked out within that study in 2015 was the lack of stretch for the more able pupil that has come from primary school. While the others are catching up, they tread water a little during key stage 3. Do you think that has changed? If it has not, how do you propose to make sure that those children are given appropriate levels of challenge and allowed to achieve their full potential?

Mr Walker: Challenging the more able pupil is part of why I think it is so important to have a very broad, rich curriculum at that phase as well and to make sure that this isn't just a phase of preparation for GCSEs and focusing on GCSE content in advance. The tools are there within the



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curriculum we have. One of the challenges is to make sure that we don't create perverse disincentives for schools to focus on other things. In that respect, that is something that we need to keep on working on very closely with the accountability system, with the broad approach. I think a focus on the richness and diversity of the curriculum at that stage is very important. It is not just paying lip service to these things; it is about building the knowledge that children can benefit from in the long run and remembering that schools are about much more than exams, although of course we want pupils to attain and do well in those exams as well, so I think in that respect it is about providing the richness and challenge.

I have to say that one of the things I hugely admire from my predecessor—one of the many things I hugely admire from my predecessor—is the drive he brought to creating the Mandarin Excellence Programme. That is a great opportunity for children to engage with something that is challenging. My only regret about it is that it is not reaching more schools, so I would love to find a way of further expanding that and driving uptake of a challenging but very important modern language. I would love to also look at the diversity of languages that we teach in our schools because I think there is an opportunity to look at this as the languages that will be useful in the 21st century. That probably goes beyond the traditional suite of languages that we taught.

Q1225 Dr Johnson: Finally, we test at key stage 1 and 2 and obviously GCSEs at key stage 4. The key stage 3 tests were abandoned in 2009, I think, by the previous Government. Do you think that they should be reinstated? Do you think that information on pupils' progress between the end of year 6 and year 9 would mean that there is an incentive to make sure all students made progress across the curriculum?

Mr Walker: There is a very difficult balance to strike on this. I believe testing does work and I think it is fair to pupils to use it, but you need to make sure it is used effectively. I think some of the challenges that we see at key stage 3 currently are to do with the pressure from tests at key stage 4. Therefore I am not sure that more testing, certainly not more testing in public exams and direct qualifications, is the answer to that particular problem. However, I do think it is very important to be able to measure progress.

I think one of the things we are going to be looking at very carefully in the White Paper is how we make sure that we drive up numeracy and literacy through the whole of schools. We often have this focus, understandably, and it is a very important factor, on the number of pupils who finish primary school without the level of literacy to engage in secondary. That is one very important element of that. What I am very keen to do is to ensure that we do have the tools necessary to improve literacy and keep on improving literacy through the whole of schools. In that respect, some kind of low—what is the word?—internalised testing process could be part of the solution, but I don't think it would be about reinstating a big, major public exam at key stage 3.



Q1226 Christian Wakeford: The comments you have just made, Minister, literally do lead me into my question. I will declare an interest as the chairman for the APPG on literacy, so I do hope I can work with you on that.

In the Budget we saw £560 million invested into the Multiply programme to tackle the adult numeracy problem. We are aware that there are roughly 9 million people in this country who either can't read or who struggle reading. This is an indictment of an education system that has failed these people. What are we doing to make sure, moving forward, that we are not adding to this number and that we are tackling this issue in a meaningful way?

Mr Walker: Absolutely, this is a crucial issue and it is one that I think, rightly, the Secretary of State has said needs to be one of the key priorities for our White Paper. I don't want to pre-empt too much of what we might say in that but, as I say, one point is not just to accept that there is only one stage at which this can be addressed. This is about all through the system. We need to look at the interventions and how we can support literacy. It is also about embedding some of the very good work that is being done.

Again, without turning this into a hagiography of Nick Gibb, I do think he did some exceptional work on systematic and synthetic phonics and how they can help in building literacy, particularly for some of the most disadvantaged pupils and some of those who have had the least support outside school. There has been real progress as a result of that and I think we have seen some real progress in primary literacy as a result, but there are still too many people missing out. That is what we have to be absolutely rigorous in targeting.

Yes, you are right to highlight the Budget money for Multiply, but of course I would point out that a lot of the money that has gone into catch-up in general has been focused around literacy and numeracy in particular. What I have seen when I have gone to visit schools up and down the country is a lot of that focus going into literacy interventions.

I think it is very important that we are clear about what we mean when we talk about literacy. It is the ability to read and write, yes, obviously, but it is also that broader level of reading. There is so much evidence that a love of reading has probably more impact on people's educational outcomes than what their background is. That is something that we need to also foster within it.

I see literacy as also key to that broad knowledge-rich curriculum that we want people to have. If you don't have the literacy to access it, then you will miss out on so much of the valuable knowledge that we want every child to have—the best that has been thought and said. To me, this is part of the key to the whole thing. Before Tom raises it, recognising the right approaches and the right mechanisms for supporting people with dyslexia as part of that is crucial.



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Chair: Given the constraints of time, we will go straight to Tom.

Q1227 **Tom Hunt:** Thank you very much. Finally, how is the Department tackling the current skills shortage among school leavers?

Mr Walker: Skills shortage in what space? Is this just generally?

Tom Hunt: This is probably connecting with the broader work the Government are doing on further education and promoting apprenticeships and so on.

Mr Walker: Obviously, Alex leads on the skills side of the Department. We have the £3.8 billion at the spending review to go into the skills. I know that the Chairman of the Select Committee, who is not here today—I wish him well for his recovery—has taken a real interest in vocational qualifications. I referred earlier to the fact that VTQs are being taken in schools right now. We wanted those exams to go ahead; they are going ahead and that process is well under way. I think skills are very important, but they are not a substitute for knowledge that people learn through the curriculum, so we need both to come through our schools.

Q1228 **Chair:** But it is about progression, where students having access to the school curriculum then make their choices about where they go next and how they make those choices.

Mr Walker: Absolutely.

Chair: It is about access to impartial education advice and guidance on careers.

Mr Walker: It is crucial, and this is an area where I think there has been progress. It is about recognising that there isn't a monopoly of wisdom on careers advice within any one part of the system. I think some of the stuff that has been done in accepting the Baker clause is important in that respect.

Q1229 **Tom Hunt:** Often what I hear is the importance of trying from an early age to create a sense and an understanding among young people that there are multiple pathways. That does not mean that you do not have to get the basics right, it does not mean you should not be doing well in maths and English and so on; it just means I am signposting at an earlier age perhaps that there is an academic pathway, which by all means might be the one you want to go down and that ultimately could end up in university, but there is also another pathway.

Mr Walker: Alongside the Chairman of this Committee, I campaigned in my early days in Parliament on apprenticeships to make sure that they would get a fair hearing in schools. I have been into sixth-form colleges in my constituency to talk about apprenticeships and how important they are. I think the culture has improved in that respect, but there is further to travel when it comes to careers advice.



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I also think that one of the very important things is—being a tiny bit controversial here—that I have heard debates in the House previously that have implied that there was at one point or another a golden age of careers advice. I simply don't believe that. I have to say, one of the important things we have recognised is that in order to get pupils to experience a range of options and to understand about the place of work, the best people to talk about that are often people from outside education, from the world of work, coming into schools and engaging with that.

The work of the Careers & Enterprise Company in that respect is very important because it provides that network. I went to an event a few years ago where Worcestershire was celebrating being the first careers hub in the country to get a private sector careers adviser into every single secondary school. That is something that I hope is now the case in many more parts of the country. Certainly, I think it is something we should continue to support and to engage with as a Department because it is very important that people have that aspiration.

Within that, I love the idea of primary careers fairs, primary careers events, where children are being talked to about a range of jobs, even though they are not necessarily being directly marketed to. I think it is a good idea to raise aspiration.

Tom Hunt: If I look at my local area where I live, there are some fantastic opportunities on my doorstep. We have a freeport in Felixstowe; we have BT; we have the research campus just outside the town. It would be very good if you had young kids from an early age dreaming of taking some of those roles, highlighting those opportunities and not just thinking that the only way they can progress is through an academic route, when it might not necessarily be the right route for them.

Q1230 Chair: While I agree with you, Minister, that there probably never was a golden age of careers advice and guidance, there were some very good examples of good practice around the country when we had the careers companies. I chaired the board of one for about six or seven years, so I have to declare that interest. I think it is important because even Lord Baker himself, who shepherded through the 1988 Education Reform Act, understood that delegating budgets to the schools created perverse incentives in terms of getting youngsters into sixth forms because bums on seats, funding regimes, caused those pressures. It has to a large extent watered down the amount of impartial careers advice and guidance being disseminated around schools themselves. The Baker clause is important from my perspective.

One last thing from me on the National Tutoring Programme. We just had Randstad in before. From the Department's perspective, how are you monitoring the progress and the impact of the National Tutoring Programme, particularly with reference to the number of disadvantaged pupils who have benefited? Will you make an analysis of the programme public, please?



Mr Walker: We have literally just published the first set of data for what has gone on over the last term with the National Tutoring Programme. We are monitoring this and Graham is very well placed to talk about this because we are literally monitoring it on a daily basis. It is something that we recognise is a crucial programme for the Department. It is very important it reaches as many people as possible and as many disadvantaged students as possible. We are engaging with them all the time on this. As Graham said earlier, we want to drive up particularly the tuition partners and the academic mentor numbers and the trajectory that we have set is demanding on that front, but perhaps in terms of future data you can—

Graham Archer: As you will know, we have a 65% target for the proportion of the programme that is taken up by disadvantaged pupils. That is tricky to monitor because of the three different aspects of it. It is relatively straightforward in terms of tuition partners, where according to our latest data we are doing better than last year, but we are not quite yet at 65%. We are unclear as yet where we are with the biggest element of that, the school-led element. That we will only know with any confidence when we have census data in play. I think, on academic mentors, we need to pull out the reach that those mentors have so that we are clear within schools how many of the pupils that they are working with are disadvantaged.

I meet Randstad weekly. I have a formal delivery board with it this afternoon, where this will definitely be on the agenda. You can rest assured we are all over it—I suppose that is what I would say.

Mr Walker: The other thing that may be helpful to the Committee is that we are conducting formal evaluations, so when you talk about things that will be published in due course, it is an evaluation that is being conducted for years 1 and 2 by the National Foundation for Educational Research. We expect results from the year 1 overarching evaluation to be published this summer and, of course, that is information that, as and when it is published, we will be able to share with the Committee.

Q1231 **Chair:** Very lastly from me, your predecessor set out a summer consultation process on initial teacher training and that will set up a national flagship teacher and leader development provider. Are you convinced that by following that process you are not going to be throwing the baby out with the bathwater? We know that improvements need to be made on initial teacher training and, of course, on CPD, but are you convinced that this process is not going to end up throwing the baby out with the bathwater?

Mr Walker: Yes. First of all, I think the institute of teaching will be a great addition to the system, but it is supposed to be there as an addition to the system, it is not supposed to be replacing what is already there. I think it is important to put that on the record.

Chair: In that case, you need to engender more confidence in the current



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providers.

Mr Walker: With the ITT market review, I recognise some of the concerns that were raised by providers as part of the response to the consultation on that. We engaged with that, we engaged with a lot of the individual providers who had raised concerns, and I think even our harshest critics would accept we took on board many of those concerns with the changes we made in terms of time and the changes we made in terms of having multiple layers to the accreditation process. I am very keen that this is a process that should help to raise quality but also protect the diversity of both schools and universities contributing very significantly to initial teacher training.

I have to say we had a lot of feedback through the whole process. What I sought to do, as a new Minister coming into this, is to take that on board and see how and where we could respond to that. We have provided extra support and investment to the sector as a result of that and I think we are in a better place than perhaps if we had just gone ahead, not having responded in that way to the consultation. It is something we need to keep a very close eye on because I recognise it is crucially important. Perhaps partly because of the pandemic we saw record numbers of people coming into ITT last year, which is great. Those numbers are down this year, but they are still above where they were in 2019.

I want to make sure we can keep both the quantity and the quality high and then, as you say, crucially feed that into our reforms on ECF and CPD and supporting teachers in their early careers as well. This is a vital area to get right. It takes a lot of my time in terms of the focus that we have, similarly to NTP. We have similar groups on ECF and the NPQs, really focusing on the detail of how these are rolling out and how they are working. With the ITT market review, what I would hope to see is the vast majority of people who support good-quality ITT finding the accreditation process relatively straightforward to go through, having that extra support for having gone through it, and an even stronger system as a result.

Chair: We are running out of time from a broadcast perspective, and I gather that there is a hotter ticket somewhere else in this place for events that are just about to take place. Minister and Graham, thank you very much for your participation today. Finally, we send our best wishes to our missing Chair.