

## Written evidence submitted by Mr & Mrs Ridderbeekx

### **Introduction:**

When Government announced that schools would have to be closed as part of the national effort to fight the Covid 19 pandemic, parents around the country were naturally understanding and collaborative, despite the many challenges it presented to families; notably those with members as key workers and those with underlying health conditions. School leaders, teachers and support staff have risen impressively to the challenge with a view to securing short-term continuity of education for our children. Our sincere admiration and thanks go out to all those key workers who have kept our country going during the past several months.

Given the urgency to commence lockdown, it has fallen on school leaders to decide what would be the best teaching model to use for their circumstances, taking into account the relevant variables such as staffing levels and IT capabilities. As a result, schools up and down the country have chosen widely varying solutions to providing education continuity. It has become evident that private school establishments were largely better prepared for lockdown than grant-maintained schools, conscious as they would have been of the high expectations placed upon them by fee-paying parents. But even within the grant-maintained sector there have been marked differences in both delivery methods and quality of teaching. In the state sector, limited expectation appears to have been placed on schools to deliver excellence through the prolonged period of lockdown.

During a short period or crisis, differences in delivery quality are easily tolerated in the expectation that before long, the 'normal' system can and will resume. However, no-one could have predicted that schools would stay closed quite as long as they have been already; and we are horrified at reports that even the new school year may not start as scheduled in September. It must be a government priority to ensure that the 2020/21 school year starts and finishes as planned.

Against this background, the different approaches between schools and the knock-on effects of the choices made by school leadership teams and their Trustees/Governors on the future opportunities of our children are becoming extremely concerning and in need of detailed investigation and scrutiny. The longer the divergence of delivery persists, the more stark the inequalities become; between the State and Independent sector, between Grammar Schools, CoE schools and Academies and between schools in different parts of the country. Those inequalities have already, and will continue to have, grave consequences for our children if they are not recognised and dealt with promptly.

### **Our personal experience:**

Our daughter attends [school name] Grammar School in [location] and is in the crucial Year 10, preparing for GCSE exams next June. She is a diligent student who achieves good results in most subjects and her academic development matters greatly to her as her future ambitions are becoming clearer to her.

In the immediate transition from normal school life to lockdown schooling, we were impressed with the sense of urgency and level of calm organisation displayed by the school. Clear and digestible information was provided via the school website.

From the start of lockdown, teachers would send guidance to students on Monday morning regarding the work to be completed for the whole week, along with relevant video links and any work to be submitted for marking. Teachers would occasionally be available via email to answer any queries.

Our daughter took to the new method quickly and displayed the self-discipline required to follow the normal timetable throughout the week, a discipline that we are pleased she has been able to retain. She suffers from mild, high-functioning autism (previously known as Asperger's Syndrome) which causes periods of anxiety in school. Whilst lockdown has provided respite from the social pressures of school which are often a trigger for her anxiety, the lack of guidance and support has left her feeling insecure about her progress. This has placed new pressures on her mental health.

As parents, we appreciated the opportunity to be more closely involved, although we were not always able to help with the work if she became stuck and it wasn't always possible to get hold of teachers in order to clarify things. This has led to frustration and a lack of direction at times. She has found it particularly challenging to both take the time to teach herself the subject and then complete all the exercises required in the normal school day. She has often worked late at night and at the weekends. Infrequent contact with teachers and sparse feedback has at times been demoralising.

It was therefore always logical to us that, in time, remote learning would begin to involve direct contact using online video conference technology, which in many ways has been the breakthrough technology of the lockdown that has enabled a level of continuity for many areas of society, both social and economic. Unfortunately, this logical advance began to seem unlikely when for safeguarding reasons, the school did not allow direct verbal or video contact between students and teachers, not even to answer queries.

Talking to friends with children at other schools, both private and grant-maintained, we learned the following:

- Without exception, private schools in the [location] area have been able to pivot from full face to face teaching to full online teaching, following the existing timetable, using video-conferencing technology from the start of the lockdown.
- Several other grant-maintained schools in the same area had been able to introduce full or part online teaching, following the existing timetable, within a reasonable period after lockdown began.
- Other schools, who for various reasons were unable to teach live, were also able to record and provide online lessons for the students to access at home.

Until today, the only innovation introduced by [school name] beyond what was available when lockdown commenced, is periodic Microsoft Teams instant messaging chats with teachers to deal with student queries. Repeated queries as to the school's intentions with regards direct teaching online have gone unanswered until last week, when we were advised that a series of webinars (2hrs per subject in total before September) are to be introduced alongside the very limited face to face sessions that can be held on-site during June. In that communication it was confirmed that teachers are currently as a rule relying on their own private IT equipment to do their jobs from home; if they are well enough to do so, or do not have childcare responsibilities.

[school name] approach to implementing the government guidance requesting 'some face to face contact' between students and teachers has been one of minimal compliance with one four-hour session offered per core subject (English, Maths and Science), to be held at school for year 10 students before the end of the year (3 half days in total). Whilst we agree that it gives students the opportunity to meet some of their classmates, we question the educational value of these sessions over and above the webinar approach. We understand that lack of physical space to allow all students on site at the same time, whilst observing social distancing, affects all but a small minority of schools.

**Our personal experience raises the following observations:**

1. In seeking continuity of education through lockdown, each school has chosen a unique approach which, in its judgement, is appropriate to the needs of the students it serves. As a result, there is no common standard being pursued, nor indeed are we aware of any standards being recommended or driven centrally by the Department of Education. As the situation perpetuates, it is inevitable that performance gaps between schools and students will grow.
2. It looks highly unlikely that schools will return to the standard, full-time face to face teaching model until such time as the two-metre distance rule is abandoned or reduced. Even if the two metre rule is reduced to 1.5 metres (in use in e.g the Netherlands) or 1 metre (minimum distance advised by the WHO), it is hard to see how all schools have the physical space available to have all students in school at the same time and therefore return to a full timetable for all students.
3. It has been suggested in Scotland that a 'blended' model may be deployed, combining teaching in person with remote learning, which has the potential to combine the worst of each solution and provide a negative net result.
4. Growing inequality between those schools that were able and willing to provide best in class online education (mainly private schools but many state schools too) and those schools with less urgency, an unjustified obsession with safeguarding and/or a poor IT infrastructure.
5. Safeguarding concerns have in our view been used as an excuse by some schools to mask the real reasons for resisting or delaying live online tuition. The real reasons may include teaching staff objecting, inadequate IT infrastructure, inadequate school leadership or imagination, or staff absenteeism (through illness or childcare issues).
6. There is an urgent need to establish common standards of remote learning across all schools to reduce the wide disparities that have emerged between schools across all sectors. As the government prioritises levelling up the country economically, it is now apparent that this also stretches to education. We appreciate that this would require significant investment in schools' IT infrastructure.
7. [school name] advises parents that students' progress can be competently evaluated by their subject teachers based on the output of work carried out during lockdown. On the one hand, this raises the question whether students were being unnecessarily over-tested before lockdown. On the other hand, it risks a disproportionate degree of subjectivity in evaluation that may affect future opportunities for our children by either their performance being appraised too harshly or not harshly enough. Again, there is no sight of a common benchmark or standard.
8. Year 11 GCSE exams are fundamentally important to children's future opportunities and ambitions. Given the wide divergence of education quality around the country and across the different service providers during the lockdown period, it is hard to see how standardised GCSE exams will give a fair reflection of children's GCSE attainment. To use an analogy, planes need a minimum amount of runway on order to successfully take off and we would not authorise a plane to take off with less than the minimum runway ahead of them. We are heading to a place where we are asking our children to do just that. As a generalisation, children in private schools appear to have by far the longest runway, whilst within the state sector, the length of runway is proportionate to the decision-making quality of Heads. This makes the 2021 GCSE little more than a lottery. This point is equally valid for those students preparing for A-level exams in 2021.
9. Aside from the disparity in service delivery by schools, the home and personal environments of students are a crucial variable too. Whilst the physical school environment can cater for differing learning styles, during lockdown students have been forced to comply with only one. As a result of our daughter's Asperger's, her learning style has, rather fortuitously, appeared to be suitable to the remote learning method in use during lockdown. That said, having to self-teach and receiving only sparse feedback and guidance from subject teachers has been difficult and a considerable cause of anxiety that many other children will have also experienced.

Diversely, we know of other students who have struggled much more to self-motivate or retain their attention on school work, oftentimes because of busy households with parents and siblings all competing for space, computer equipment or attention.

10. Finally, we have to face the reality that many families have been struck by the virus, either by family members falling ill and requiring treatment or in the worst case, succumbing to it. Our sympathy goes to all those families struck by the virus. Children in those families will have seen their formative years impacted in the most severe way and special assistance needs to be provided to them.

**Recommendations:**

1. Common gold standards for remote teaching by secondary schools must be developed as a matter of urgency, in the event that lockdown continues into the 2020/21 school year, a second lockdown is required, or a new viral threat strikes in the future. This standard should be regularly reviewed in the context of technological advances made.
2. The two-metre rule should be reviewed as soon as possible for schools, if not for the rest of society, as a pre-requisite to giving the education system the chance to plan for a return to 'normal' teaching.
3. If 'normal' teaching is not possible given scientific insight into the risks of a return or flare-up of the pandemic in Britain, then a choice should be made to focus teaching fully online, using the best available video-technology in all schools. Government should make the investment available to enable all teachers to teach from home and all students to learn from home.
4. Education experts should be appointed to prepare a report identifying solutions to the disparate opportunities provided to students to prepare for success in GCSE or A-Level exams. It is inappropriate to ask all students to sit standardised tests when preparation has not been standardised and a significant part of the school year has been lost or disrupted.

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