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Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP
Minister of State for School Standards

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Councillor Ray Gooding
Cabinet Member for Education and Skills
Essex County Council
By email: cllr.ray.gooding@essex.gov.uk

5 May 2021

Dear Cllr Gooding,

Thank you for your letter of 13 November, addressed to the Secretary of State, regarding the impact of COVID-19 on schools. I am replying as the Minister of State for School Standards.

I am sorry for the delay in responding to your letter. This has been caused by a significant increase in the number of letters we have received alongside the increased workload for civil servants as we continue to tackle the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak for the education sector.

On 22 February, the Prime Minister announced that primary and secondary schools would reopen to all pupils from 8 March. The return to school for all pupils is being prioritised due to the significant and proven impact caused by being out of school to the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

When we took the decision to ask schools to restrict attendance in January, this was to support the reduction in the overall number of social contacts in our communities, which was a vital intervention in the context of the high prevalence of COVID-19. As a result of the efforts the country has made, it is now possible for schools to welcome back pupils in all year groups. We have published our evidence summary paper, which sets out an assessment of the evidence relevant to the Government's decision to lift restrictions on education from 8 March. This is available at: tinyurl.com/fr6va554.

With regard to inspections, Ofsted will resume its full programme of routine, graded school inspections for state funded schools in September 2021. During the summer term, Ofsted intends to restart some onsite inspections under its Education Inspection Framework. The inspections are due to start from 4 May. Details of the inspection plans are available at: tinyurl.com/46Pz72f9.

Ofsted is currently piloting some changes to its inspections to take account of the challenges raised by COVID-19. It intends to publish updated inspection handbooks with full details of these changes in due course.

For independent schools, not including academies, Ofsted and the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) will continue to undertake emergency, progress monitoring and material change inspections where appropriate in the summer term.

For the summer term 2021, from 4 May, Ofsted intend to restart some onsite standard inspections under its Education Inspection Framework and ISI intend to restart some standard inspections under its Regulatory Compliance Inspection Framework. Further information about these inspection arrangements will be available from inspectorates soon.

With regard to examinations in 2021, students will not be asked to sit their GCSE, AS and/or A levels as planned due to the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak.

In January, Ofqual and the Department launched a two week consultation to seek the views of students, parents and carers, teachers, further and higher education institutions, and employers, to ensure that grades are awarded fairly to all students. We received over 100,000 responses to the consultation and are grateful to everyone who contributed. A summary and analysis of the consultation responses is available at: tinyurl.com/d7htkxxx.

On 25 February, the Secretary of State confirmed that pupils will receive grades determined by their teachers, with pupils only being assessed on what they have been taught. In the absence of examinations, the Department is placing its trust in teachers this year who, supported by clear guidance, are best placed to make evidence based judgements of their student's attainment. Teacher assessed grades will allow results to be based on the knowledge and skills students have demonstrated based on what they have been taught, recognising the variability in teaching that some young people have experienced.

The Department wants to ensure that teachers are supported to assess their pupils. The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) has now published clear guidance for centres to support them to determine teacher assessed grades. This guidance is available at: tinyurl.com/hwxfeue3.

We will not be publishing school or college level educational performance data based on tests, assessments or examinations for 2020-21. We have published guidance that explains how school and college accountability will operate in 2020-21, which is available at: tinyurl.com/3Pkc5J36.

With regard to the mental health of pupils and young people, we know that the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak and its associated measures are likely to be long lasting, and issues related to mental health and wellbeing will continue to be picked up throughout the school year.

Our £8 million Wellbeing for Education Return programme is continuing to offer ongoing support, advice and resources for schools and colleges this term. Further information is available at: tinyurl.com/8353s9x4.

The return to school for all pupils is being prioritised due to the significant and proven impact caused by being out of school, including on wellbeing. The support schools provide to their pupils as they return to face to face education should include time devoted to supporting wellbeing, which will play a fundamental part in supporting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing recovery.

We have recently announced a £79 million boost to children and young people's mental health support, including through Mental Health Support Teams. The support teams provide early intervention on mental health and emotional wellbeing issues in schools and colleges and they will grow from the 59 set up by last March to around 400 by April 2023, supporting nearly 3 million children. This increase means that millions of children and young people will have access to significantly expanded mental health services.

We recognise that all children and young people have had their education disrupted as a result of COVID-19. It is our ambition to ensure that all pupils have the chance to make up for this lost education, ensuring that everyone can reach their potential in the long term.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nick Gold', is centered on a white background with a light grey grid pattern.