



Education Settings: Wider Opening - Summary

House of Commons - Debate Summary - House of Commons

10/06/2020

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson made a statement to the house regarding the wider opening of nurseries, schools and colleges as part of the response to the covid-19 pandemic. Williamson told the chamber that it was important for children and young people to be in education and childcare and that it was vital to get them back there as soon as the scientific advice indicates that they can. He added that he was pleased the Government's five tests were being met so that nurseries and other early years providers are able to welcome back children, as well as pupils in reception, year 1 and year 6, at least in smaller class sizes.

Williamson cited Government data and said that "Ninety-seven per cent of schools that submitted data to the Department for Education were open at the end of last week." As of Monday 8th June, seventy per cent of primary schools that had responded had reopened. He turned to the issue of schools in the north west expressing concern about reopening due to the local levels of transmission. Williamson assured them that the SAGE R estimate for the UK was below 1. He added that "if robust data shows that local action needs to be taken, we will not hesitate to do so, but we are not in that position."

On the next step of the Government approach, Williamson said secondary schools and colleges would be able to provide some face-to-face support from 15th June for years 10 and 12 and 16-to-19 in the first year of a two-year programme of study, who are due to take key exams next year. He added that children of critical workers and vulnerable children in all secondary year grounds would be able to attend full-time. He added that his department has published guidance which include information about protective measures in educational settings including restricting class sizes, limiting mixing between groups and encouraging regular handwashing and frequent cleaning.

He told the house that primary schools would not be able to welcome back all students for a full month before the summer. He did however add that he would work with the sector on next steps for primary schools, including the possibility of those with capacity to bring back more pupils before the summer break. Williamson added that he would be working hard to ensure that all children would be back by September, adding that exams would go ahead next year and that he was working with Ofqual and the exam boards on how to approach these.

Shadow Education Secretary Rebecca Long Bailey told the chamber that headteachers, education unions, school staff and many parents had warned that opening primary schools before the summer break was impractical, she welcomed the announcement today. She was critical of the way this had been handled by the Government in recent weeks. Bailey cited the Children's Commissioner and stated that the crisis is causing a deepening education disadvantage gap, she called on the Government to scale-up their response and recommended the need to support summer schemes for students. She called on a national plan for education bringing together unions, parents and experts. She called on the minister to fund free school meals over the summer holidays.

Williamson told the chamber that he would continue to work with all bodies to work to ensure that schools can open safely going forward. On summer schools, Williamson said that "we need to take a longer-term approach on how we can support children over a longer period of time."

Chair of the Education Committee Robert Halfon asked what the Government was doing to help disadvantaged students learn again and to avoid educational poverty? Williamson said that IT equipment was being rolled out across the school estate and for vulnerable children, stating that 100,000 laptops had been distributed to disadvantaged children.

SNP Shadow Secretary of State for Education Carol Monaghan called on a plan for education along the lines being developed by the Scottish Government. She said such a plan should cover all possible scenarios and focus on blended learning, with greatly increased support for disadvantaged children. She asked Williamson whether he would consider using public buildings such as libraries or council offices to relieve pressure on classroom space? Williamson said, "the limit of 15 children per class obviously limits the ability to have as many year groups in school as we would like, but as that is changed, we will have the ability to slowly and cautiously move forward and welcome more children back to school when it is the right time."

Chair of the Public Accounts Committee Meg Hillier asked why the minister could not provide the house with information today on plans for vulnerable pupils. Williamson said "on a catch-up plan, this is not something that is just over a few weeks; the approach has to be over a full year and more. That is what we are putting in place and how we will support children in the long term."

Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Education Layla Moran asked for clarity from Williamson on laptop provision. She asked if he would explain how he is prioritising the most disadvantaged children, citing Halfon who said 700,000 pupils are without devices. Williamson said that "a total of 230,000 laptops will be going out as part of that programme as well as tens of thousands of routers to help children from some of the most vulnerable families, who perhaps have some limited resources at home."

Chair of the Backbench Business Committee Ian Mearns said that that he notes the throw away criticism by Williamson about the National Education Union to Bailey. He said this was ironic considering that he did not even consult the National Association of Head Teachers, regarding the original 1 June restart date. On schools reopening, he said a one-size-fits all policy should never have been considered. Williamson said, "we want to work with local authorities that have concerns to make sure they are in a position to open all their schools and, where they face practical problems or issues, to discuss that with them to ensure that all their schools are open."

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