



**Jennette Arnold OBE AM**  
**Chair of the Education Panel**

## Appendix 2

Gavin Williamson

Secretary of State for Education

(Sent by email)

15 October 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

On 30 September 2020, the London Assembly Education Panel held a formal meeting to explore the effect that the COVID-19 school closures have had on education inequality in London.

The Panel heard from expert witnesses: Stuart Darke (Regional Organiser, Greater London Regional Centre, NASUWT), Rebecca Montacute (Research and Policy Manager, Sutton Trust), Rob Coe (Senior Associate, Education Endowment Foundation) and Joanne McCartney (Deputy Mayor for Education and Childcare). We also received written testimony from Steve Chalke (Founder, Oasis Academies) and London Councils. The meeting brought into focus a real concern about the decision-making processes around, and communications of, the examinations system being applied for the 2020/21 academic year.

We note that you announced on 12 October that most exams will be going ahead next year, but three weeks later than originally scheduled, and that you will be working with Ofqual and other stakeholders over the coming weeks to develop contingency plans to account for various possible pandemic scenarios and the subsequent effect on education.

The Panel is concerned that this delay to the exam programme may not be sufficient to ensure exams will not unfairly impact students who, through a variety of circumstances, have been most affected by the school closures, and were least able to continue with their studies as normal from home. At our meeting, the Panel's witnesses agreed (prior to your announcement) that a delay of a

few weeks would be unlikely to constitute a significant enough amendment to the 2020/21 assessment programme to counter the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown school closures. As Rob Coe told the Panel, although exams are often seen as a fair method of assessment, “if you come from a housing situation and a school situation that is more challenging and more disadvantaged, having to sit the same exam does not address that.” Research confirms that those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds have seen the greatest impact on their learning. Teachers in the most deprived schools were more than twice as likely as those in advantaged schools to report that their students’ work submissions were of a lower quality than before lockdown.<sup>1</sup>

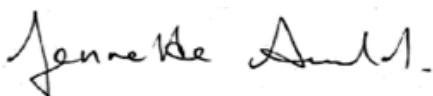
Disadvantaged students, for example those in digital poverty, that have experienced learning gaps as a result of setbacks from access to education will require more time to become equal to their more advantaged peers. National research by the Sutton Trust has laid bare this inequality. It found that in the most deprived schools, 15 per cent of teachers reported that more than a third of their students would not have adequate access to an electronic device for learning from home, compared to only 2 per cent in the most affluent state schools. In the most deprived schools, 12 per cent of teachers felt that more than a third of their students would not have adequate internet access.<sup>2</sup> In disadvantaged areas of London, the reality of this exclusion can be stark: earlier this year a school in South London reported that 24 per cent of its pupils are “effectively offline”.<sup>3</sup>

The Panel also found that there is urgent need for clear ongoing communication from the Department for Education to schools about examinations and potential future disruption. We note that your Department will be working with Ofqual and other stakeholders to develop contingency planning for various pandemic scenarios, and we urge you to ensure that this planning results in strong and clear guidance for schools, so that they can better plan provision for their students with differing needs, as well as their staff.

We would like to understand the analysis behind the decision to delay the exams by three weeks, so that the Panel can understand if this is sufficient time to level up education outcomes. Please could you report to the Panel the data and research used to inform this decision, explain if the decision incorporates the needs of children most affected by the COVID-19 school closures, and provide a list of the stakeholders that were consulted. Further, we ask for assurance that your scenario planning process is informed by this same data and will incorporate fair communications and guidance plans for schools.

I would be grateful to receive this information by 30 October. Please copy your response to the Panel’s Committee Assistant, Lamide Odanye, [lamide.odanye@london.gov.uk](mailto:lamide.odanye@london.gov.uk).

Yours sincerely,



**Jennette Arnold OBE AM**  
**Chair of the Education Panel**

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<sup>1</sup> Sutton Trust, [COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief #1: School Shutdown](#), April 2020

<sup>2</sup> Sutton Trust, [COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief #1: School Shutdown](#), April 2020

<sup>3</sup> BBC, [‘Digital poverty’ in schools where few have laptops](#), April 2020